

Calling Forth the Choral Community: Social Band Showcases Vermont Composers

By Alan Lewis

Special to the *Vermont Guardian*, November 18 - 24, 2005

Culture section, page 19

“A COUPLE of years ago, a group of Social Band members were sitting around my living room talking about the future direction of the group,” said Vermont Composers Project Director Ken Brown. “Someone suggested, ‘Why don't we do an entire concert of original compositions?’” Commissioning of new works began in April 2004, and this effort has now taken tangible form as Social Band's “Vermont Composers Project,” one of the finest VT-connected CDs of 2005.

The original plan, explained Artistic Director Amity Baker, “was to give a group of talented people a reason to compose something that was choral and a cappella. Some ... had never written choral works before, so it was a way to encourage folks to stretch themselves and take a stab at this genre. Others were tried and true choral composers. In either case, Social Band was interested in bringing new choral work into the community and creating a project that would showcase the wonderful and varied talent that we have in Vermont.”

The music on “Vermont Composers Project is nicely varied, though early American influences run strong. American shape-note tradition, said Baker, “is a style that Social Band has always loved because of its robust singing style and because it was written by folks from all walks of life for their own communities. This feeling of community music-making is part of what inspires Social Band.” Apparent later inspirations range from tight barbershop quartet harmonies to Van Dyke Parks' psychedelic chuckles.

Peter Amidon may recall from his days with the spirited late-1970s Larry Gordon-led Word of Mouth Chorus that this music can crackle with energy. Though he has also sung in both Northern Harmony and Village Harmony, “Beatitudes,” his Social Band offering, is his first original choral production.

Like the other composers, Amidon took this task very seriously. “In writing the piece,” he said, “I was inspired by the rhythms and drifting melodies of 12th-century Gregorian chant, and I tried to have the shifting harmonies of the piece match the drifting melody. I wrote it at home, using the piano to work out the harmonies. I tried it out a couple of times with the family before sending it off to Social Band.”

“My piece, ‘Sweet Is the Day,’” said Mary Alice Amidon, “is my first four-part composition. ... I chose a text from the shape-note singing tradition... by Isaac Watts, used for the song ‘Devotion’ in the ‘Sacred Harp.’ I intended it to have the spirit of a shape-note song, a lively yet lyrical piece of music that expresses our deepest longings: ‘Oh may my heart in tune be found, like David's harp of solemn sound.’”

“I was honored by Social Band's invitation,” said Katie Shimizu, “though I was dubious of my ability to deliver anything they would be able to use. I poured over some of my favorite tunes, searching for a text that I connected enough with to give them something that came from my heart and not just four parts of a tune I had plunked out on a keyboard. The words from ‘Farewell Hymn’ have always struck me; I like the approach to tragedy it conveys. To me it's not a song of sadness, but one of acceptance.

“I sat down at my old composer chair and out it came. All four parts, all fitting, all playing off each other, sounding boisterous and triumphant. I looked it over a few times, sang the parts to make sure they worked, and then it was done.”

Shimizu was quite pleased with Social Band’s performance of her propulsive “Certainty” this summer. “[T]hey were all grinning at each other, swinging their arms, and having a generally good time singing it.”

Robert Resnik of Vermont Public Radio composed the bright, playful, and very attractive “Chords.” Pete Sutherland, in turn, first heard the Social Band recording of his own work on Resnik’s VPR broadcast, “All the Traditions.”

“For ‘Chirripo Meditation,’ a setting of a Costa Rican friend’s journal entries on his bi-weekly commuter route through the cloud forest on foot, I envisioned a kind of solid and stately block of men’s voices singing phrases that naturally followed the unrhymed text,” said Sutherland. “I am a strong believer in the power of melody no matter how embellished by arrangement, so I needed to have that first and build around it. I employed harmony that borrows from both barbershop and Beatles and let the thing find its own route on its own sweet time.”

“I hadn’t written a choral piece for about six years,” said Anna Patton, “so I was touched that Social Band liked my old songs enough to trust that there was more where that came from.” She explained, “I wrote ‘Marin Drinov’ while living on a street of that name in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. ... I chose the text and wrote the piece while thinking about all the things people bring with them while abroad: memorized texts and melodies and a whole world of individual and cultural associations and meanings.”

Patti Casey shines with her twangy “It All Comes Down.” It “was written while on the road in North Carolina last year. I was listening to radio,” she said, “which is heavily religious, and I heard a bit of some Bible reading that actually resonated with me in a practical way. It referred to us humans as stewards of the earth and responsible for taking care of it. ... I love four-part gospel style singing, so I chose that format, and voila! there was the song.”

“We knew from the outset of this project,” said Baker, “that we would have selections that crossed many genres and we hoped it would give rise to choral pieces that otherwise might not have been ‘birthed.’ This project has transformed us as a group and will definitely inspire our future work.”