

Social Band, *Vermont Composers Project* (self-released, CD)

by Casey Rea
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Social Band, Vermont's "lively group of singers," have certainly had a busy year. As part of their ambitious Vermont Composers Project, the choral group commissioned, rehearsed and performed original works by 25 Green Mountain tunesmiths. Now the fruit of their collaborative labor is available on a CD packed with stirring music and in-depth liner notes.

With offerings from non-pop iconoclast David Gunn to folk songstress Patti Casey, *Vermont Composers Project* nicely illustrates the musical diversity found in the state. Such varied material may sound unwieldy from the mouths of lesser singers. Social Band, however, have created a unified album highlighting the links among classical, traditional and modern music.

A cappella is experiencing a resurgence, possibly due to its unadorned dynamism. Social Band certainly delivers in this department – each song bristles with sensitivity and enthusiasm.

Opener "Certainty" by Kate Shimizu tackles the subject of life's impermanence without sounding maudlin. "Vain World Adieu" by Vermont Youth Orchestra Director Troy Peters takes spiritual inspiration from New English choral tradition. Susan Comen's "Aurora" is decidedly medieval; its potent melody conjures images of antiquity.

Despite strong ties to tradition, much of the material is forward-looking. Sara Doncaster's offering, "The Quangle Wangle's Hat," brings a delicious density to a whimsical children's poem by Edward Lear. "The Brain" by Jorge Martin places an Emily Dickinson poem in an expanse of richly textured harmony. Moira Smiley's "Find Ways" is as complex as any progressive-rock number, a stunning web of rhythm and modality.

Choral director Amity Baker leads her 20-plus singers through the tunes with nimble authority. Whether the band is performing Betsy Brigham's sweet-tempered "The End of Sadness" or Jon Gailmor's doo-wop-influenced "Say It Now," they do so with the benefit of a smart conductor.

The beauty of this union can be summed up in lyrics of Robert Resnik's offering, "Chords": "When the melody and the rhythm fit your body like a skin / when the songs you sing make children float and grownups young again / then it doesn't really matter how it begins or ends / we can all get lost inside that sweet refrain."

Vermont Composers Project proves choral music needn't rely entirely on dusty hymns and ancient madrigals for its source material. Kudos to Social Band and their composer pals for making this so gorgeously obvious.