

Vocal group's latest gig is all Vermont, all the time

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By Jim Lowe

More than a year ago, Social Band issued a challenge to Vermont composers to write music for the Burlington a cappella ensemble. Now, the 23-voice choir finds itself challenged by the composers.

Performing home-grown music is nothing new to Social Band. Its membership has long numbered several composers, and its programs nearly always include new music by Vermonters.

“What if we did a complete program of Vermont music?” one of its members suggested.

So the ensemble approached 25 composers – some of them friends of the members, others they had heard and liked.

Although the chorus is best-known for early European and American music, it invited composers of a wide variety of styles to contribute – classical to folk, jazz to traditional.

“We thought we’d ask this many and not all would respond,” explains Amity Baker, Social Band’s director. “They’d all write something, but not everything they would write would be something that we could perform.

“... But – except two who opted to not participate – we haven’t had any attrition.”

Social Band will perform the first chapter in its “Vermont Composers Project” over the next two weekends in concerts in Montpelier, Vergennes and Burlington.

The choir was founded in 1998 by Burlington musicians Liz Thompson, director of the now-defunct vocal ensemble Anima, and Don Jamison, a respected Vermont composer. Membership is by audition, and singers come from throughout Vermont for rehearsals of two hours weekly — twice weekly for this program.

The group’s repertoire has mainly consisted of Medieval and Renaissance music, early American shape-note music, and contemporary music written in these styles. So, it was a big stretch when Social Band found itself taking on music ranging from traditional to gospel to avant-garde classical.

“That’s the most fun thing about it – and also the most difficult thing about it,” Baker says. “It’s hard to get in a groove for an entire set because nothing in the set is entirely of the same ilk.”

Once funding was in place from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Vermont Arts Council and other foundations, Jamison drew up guidelines as well as suggestions for writing for Social Band.

“We were assuming everybody we invited were competent musicians, but had not necessarily written for chorus,” he says. “For some it was their first work for chorus.”

He recommended text that would “roll off the tongue” like Yeats or the work of early American shape-note composer Isaac Watts.

Baker also remembers advising composers: ““This is the range. If you go below this in the basses, you won’t be happy with what you hear. If you go above this with the sopranos, you won’t be happy with what you hear.” Some of this was based on the strengths and weaknesses of Social Band.”

And the pieces came in.

“The quality is better than I could have hoped for – no disasters,” Jamison says. “There’s nothing I would call atonal.”

At first, there had been some concern that this might become the caricature of a new music program – dry and difficult.

“But this is a warm bunch of pieces, audience-friendly,” Jamison says. “I think if we’d been more committee-like and rigorous about it, we wouldn’t have gotten some of the more interesting pieces.”

Baker finds among the most interesting “Through Sun and Rain” by Burlington singer-songwriter Rachel Bissex, who died in February of breast cancer at age 48.

“She really went into some new territory to make it choral,” Baker says. “She worked in a chant-like element, an almost trance-like chant. It’s very difficult to characterize.”

Brattleboro’s Mary Alice and Peter Amidon, with a long history in Vermont’s shape-note music scene, each contributed.

“Mary Alice’s is more traditional,” Jamison says. “Peter’s has a lot of fourths (unconventional chords) in it. It sounds sacred and it’s got an interesting free rhythm to it.”

Gospel songs were submitted not only by John Harrison, director of the Montpelier Community Gospel Choir, but by singer-songwriters Jon Gailmor of Elmore and Patti Casey of Montpelier, lead singer of the Bluegrass Gospel Project.

Baker compares Casey’s four-part harmony song, “It All Comes Down,” to Stanley Brothers’ songs.

“We’re going to end up using a smaller group, which is more suited to that,” she says.

Baker’s current favorite – it changes all the time – is “Apple Tree” by Burlington jazz musician Tom Cleary, who is also music director for St. Michael’s Playhouse.

“It’s a little bit jazzy, it’s very choral, and it’s delightful,” Baker says.

The classical composers’ pieces present the biggest difficulty, and perhaps the most difficult is the offering by Jorge Martin of Addison, a respected composer of songs, opera and chamber music.

“Jorge wrote a piece that’s often in eight parts,” Jamison says. “It’s short – thankfully. It’s a setting of Emily Dickinson poetry that has beautiful chords, the connections between which are sometimes hard for us to make – but we’re getting it.”

On the other hand, not everything is so serious.

“David Gunn wrote us a David Gunn piece,” Jamison says – with a laugh – of the witty Barre composer. “It’s got a really great text, funny – it’s about slugs. He uses the voices really well.”

The classical pieces “are the things we have to stretch ourselves most to sing,” Baker says. “From our perspective, those are the most challenging, trying to do justice to them with the timbre they require, the kind of blend that they require, and things like that.”

In fact, Irasburg composer Sara Doncaster’s piece isn’t going to be ready for these concerts.

“It’s another difficult one,” Jamison says. “It’s an easy to understand piece but it’s got a lot of tricky changes in it. We’re not quite ready for it.”

But it’ll be ready for another program. Social Band looks to take the current program, variations on it, and new programs made up from the group’s cache to future concerts.

“We want to take this all the way through the year throughout Vermont and beyond,” Baker says. “We’re in the process of booking – the purpose was to take it as far and wide as we could.”

If nothing else, Social Band’s “Vermont Composers Project” showcases the diversity of music-making in this state.

“Looking back on the process of choosing, we think of people we missed. It’s kind of like we can’t wait to do the same thing in a couple of years when we can ask folks that didn’t get on this list,” Baker says. “We just love to do new music.”