

Social Band sings Vermont's music

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By Jim Lowe

BURLINGTON – For a community chorus to perform contemporary music is a challenge, but to perform a program made up entirely of new music – and to do it well – is nothing short of amazing.

But, that's just what Social Band did with its Vermont Composers Project. The 23-voice Burlington community chorus invited some 25 Vermont composers to write for them and ended up with songs ranging in style from early American shape-note to gospel to pop to contemporary classical.

The opening series of three performances features 23 of the a cappella works and culminated with Sunday's concert at Burlington's First Unitarian Universalist Society church, following performances the previous weekend in Montpelier and Vergennes.

Perhaps the most beautiful was Addison composer Jorge Martin's "The Brain," a setting of the Emily Dickinson poem of the same name. Martin is a composer of contemporary opera and art song, and this work, despite its difficult harmonies, proved haunting yet tender and quietly dramatic.

"The Brain" was also likely the most difficult to perform, but director Amity Baker and the 22 other choristers successfully delivered this fascinatingly beautiful work with flair.

Much more in Social Band's tradition was "Mansions in the Sky" by Seth Houston, a former member of the chorus now living in the Brattleboro area. Houston combined two traditional shape-note texts, by Isaac Watts and Samuel Stenneett, and set them to a score that takes the American Colonial shape-note style into the 21st century. Using striking contemporary harmonies, makes this traditional style feel refreshingly original and contemporary.

In a completely different style, Burlington jazz musician Tom Cleary's "Apple Tree," with a text adapted from Bertolt Brecht's "The Caucasian Chalk Circle," separates the sections. At times one will sing the melody, while another is punctuating with a rhythmic counterpoint, all with rousing results.

Humor marked Barre classical composer David Gunn's tribute to the slug, "Tempest Fugit," very loosely adapted from Percy MacKaye's poem, "The Tempest." The ridiculously silly lyrics are given a witty but complex musical treatment that included the beginnings of a fugue – and the select group of singers performing it did it with delight.

The late contemporary folksinger Rachel Bissex was represented by her only choral effort, "Through Sun and Rain." Using her own poem, Bissex begins with a chant-like style, adding folk harmonies, for a personal and joyful effect.

There were simply too many fine efforts to mention them all in this column. The concert closed appropriately with Burlington folksinger Peter Amidon's quasi-religious "Beatitudes," simple, touching and heartfelt.