

The Social Band Project

By Tom Slayton
Vermont Public Radio Commentary

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(HOST) Music is a big part of Vermont's present and its past. Today commentator Tom Slayton takes a look at a choral group that's singing some brand new Vermont compositions that echo some of our attitudes and traditions.

(SLAYTON) For whatever reason, Vermont has had a long, historic connection with musical creativity. Justin Morgan - better known for the Morgan horse - was, by trade, a Vermont singing master who traveled from town to town. And through the years, many other outstanding composers and musicians have called Vermont home.

So perhaps it was not surprising that Social Band, a Burlington-based choral ensemble, has for years performed original compositions by its members. A couple of years ago, Social Band decided to put together an entire concert of original compositions. They invited 25 Vermont musicians and composers to write original pieces and, by last summer, they had a crop of brand new songs to start learning and practicing.

The resulting concert, now being performed around Vermont beginning in May, is a complete delight: two hours of glorious, witty choral works that are often complex, sometimes quirky, yet always accessible and fun. Content and style vary widely, from compositions in the shape-note tradition to contemporary classical pieces and lively songs with clear folk and gospel roots.

Some compositions are religious and others are playful. For example, "Mommy Was in the Shade" is a calypso-tinged piece that Bill Drislane based on a song he heard his three-year-old son singing in the bathtub after the family returned from a vacation in Florida. It's a catchy little tune that manages to be humorous, while at the same time expressing, lightly, the happy sacredness of family life.

Several of the songs celebrate the beauty of nature. These are Vermont composers, after all! Patti Casey's piece, "It All Comes Down," reminds the listener to be a steward of the land, "seek wisdom and show mercy." Casey said the piece unites her "Buddhist leanings" and "deep love of bluegrass" music.

In "The Summer Day," Liz Thompson repeats three times, with increasing musical intensity, a Mary Oliver poem that equates prayer with simple attention and appreciating the beauty of the natural world. Again, not foreign thoughts to Vermonters.

Some of the loveliest pieces are the contemporary settings of Sacred Harp texts. Anna Patton's "Marin Drinov" exhibits a gentler melody line and more complex harmonies than traditional shape-note pieces, yet manages to capture perfectly the sense of the powerful Isaac Watts text:

Awake, asleep, at home, Abroad
I am surrounded still by God.

There's a deep thread of contemplation and a lot of tradition in these Vermont compositions sung by Social Band. Both choral music and the shape-note tradition have a strong historic connection with Vermont, of course, and the themes woven through this new music - a belief in human equality, the beauty of nature, the saving grace of humor and spontaneity - also express strong Vermont values.

The musical muse is obviously alive and well in Vermont. Justin Morgan might even be pleased.

Tom Slayton is the editor of Vermont Life magazine. He spoke from our studio in Montpelier.