

Chorus ends season by showing adventurous side

By David Perkins, Globe Correspondent | June 2, 2009

CAMBRIDGE - It is a consummation devoutly to be wished that a Maytime evening would resound with settings of Shakespeare's songs, those bits of fancy that stick out like wild blossoms in his plays, at once charming and mysterious. And when you sing as beautifully as the Musica Sacra chorus, which ended its 49th season on Saturday, it seems churlish to leave discontented.

Music director Mary Beekman and her 26 skilled singers are a splendid ensemble, true in pitch in a cappella music, nicely blended and impressively accurate in difficult passages and subtle dissonances. The sopranos (all women) make as beautiful a boy-soprano sound as can be heard this side of King's College, Cambridge. The one vocal shortcoming, and it's not easy to find one, is the lack of a true organ-deep sound in the basses.

The problem, at least for this listener, was not the singing but the program. Beekman had chosen 23 settings of the great ditties, mostly from the 19th and 20th centuries, interspersed with several exquisite 17th-century madrigals. There was no grouping by period, mood, or composer. This scattered approach was deliberate, and might work, theoretically, with the right kind of contrast.

Contrast was precisely what was lacking. Six of the songs, in two groups, were by Matthew Harris, 53, a New York-based composer who writes pleasant, well-constructed, choral pieces in the homophonic, tonally centered tradition of British cathedral anthems, including several volumes of Shakespeare songs. Two of these had fun pop touches - "Who Is Sylvia" has a syncopated tenor solo (sung by Josh Stoddard), "When Daffodils Begin to Peer" might have been written for Dolly Parton - but even these were not really that different, harmonically, from the Victorian George Macfarren or late Edwardian Ralph Vaughan Williams. And in Harris's songs, the dissonances seem appliquéd and, after a while, predictable.

Only one contemporary work, New Zealander David Hamilton's setting of Caliban's song from "The Tempest," was startlingly original, with half-spoken representations of the noises on Prospero's island. Also represented were works by American Emma Lou Diemer, Briton John Rutter, and the Finn Jaako Mäntyjärvi. (No Benjamin Britten? Curiously, the composer avoided Shakespeare's songs, edgy, paradoxical texts that he could have saved from Victorian damask. He did, however, set the poem "Fancie" for unison voices. And Sir Michael Tippett, another original, set Ariel's two songs from "The Tempest.")

That there were no settings from close to Shakespeare's own day - by, say, the Thomases, Morley or Arneis - is surprising. These would be for solo voices, but a few solos or small ensembles would have been a nice change of texture.

The 17th-century works on the program - Orlando Gibbons's "What Is Our Life?," Robert Ramsey's magnificent "Sleep, Fleshly Birth," and William Byrd's "Though Amaryllis Dance" (none of them, incidentally, to Shakespearean texts) were more adventurous and richly expressive of the texts than anything else, and beautifully sung. They showed Musica Sacra at its best. ■