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AAM: SERVING THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Tapestries: Choral Music of Dan Locklair. Bel Canto Company, Greensboro, NC, David Pegg, conductor; the Choral Art Society, Portland, ME, Robert Russell, conductor; Prometheus Chamber Players (MSR Classics 1463)

MSR Classics has released a new 2-two-disc set of some not-so-new choral compositions and recordings of AAM member, Dan Locklair. While I had initially expected to hear more recent material on a disc set subtitled *Choral Music of Dan Locklair*, I came to learn how the reissue came about and I greatly enjoyed being introduced to his older pieces, quite a few of them secular. These discs were originally issued individually by Gasparo Records in the 1990s, and they represent the composer's work between 1978 and 1996. Engineers at MSR Classics were pleased with the high quality of the original recordings, and simply re-mastered them to enhance the audio to current standards. Various textures and voicings are demonstrated, thoughtfully ordered on each disc. I spoke with David Pegg and Robert Russell about their experience with Dr. Locklair; they appreciated the composer's presence at the recording sessions and his helpfully marked scores. Both conductors also mentioned mixed meters as a particular challenge that their choirs embraced.

The first CD presents Bel Canto Company, a North Carolina based professional choral group of forty auditioned singers, and the recordings on this disc were conducted by David Pegg, who stepped down as director in 2005. St. Andrew's Episcopal Church and Christ United Methodist Church in Greensboro provided recording space. Predictably, my favorite offerings are sacred: *Dona Nobis Pacem*, *Proclaim the Lord*, and *A Christmas Carol* are all lovely settings. *Alleluia Dialogues* from 1990 provides a demanding but attractive alternative to the comfortable, oft-used *Alleluia* standards by Randall Thompson and Ralph Manuel, among others. For church choirs with the performing forces and exceptional intonation required, *Three Christmas Motets* would be well worth learning.

Excellent choral, solo, and piano work is on display in *On Cats*, and Ann Doyle's piano accompaniment is surefingered and musical throughout the disc. I liked the choices of cat-themed poems, and I think this cycle of five songs would provide good material for conductors of excellent college or even high school choirs. It was written for the Gregg Smith Singers who premiered it in 1981 and it still comes off as fresh. The second CD features the Choral Art Society of Portland, ME. They market themselves as "skilled amateurs," but this is not your average community chorus. Much of the music on the second disc is more appropriate for concert programming than for Sunday mornings, and conductor Robert Russell adeptly navigated diverse compositional styles and temperaments. This disc opens with *Windswept*, a choral cycle for choir, woodwind quintet, and piano. The writing here is delightfully creative, and includes some fun effects for the winds (such as flutter-tonguing). These pieces are not published separately nor meant to be performed independently. I suspect that attaining secure ensemble and a sense of continuity could be challenging in the a cappella movements, and the chorus manages these concerns successfully. Dr. Russell praised his group for their live performances, but modestly shared credit with the audio editors and technicians for their expertise in producing such a fine recording.

I was intrigued by *For Amber Waves*, a complex setting of the first verse of *America*, lasting four and a half minutes. It is intended for five SATB choirs (one voice on each part), and meant to be placed throughout the performance space. This was recorded in the round at St. Luke's Episcopal Cathedral in Portland. It was beautifully sung, though a performance of this particular track might be aided by a more reverberant acoustic. I am eager to see a score! A highlight on the second disc is *Brief Mass*. For liturgists who have concerns about a sung choral Eucharist due to time constraints, this would work well in the context of a service, as no movement lasts longer than four minutes. "Brief" does not imply "easy," and the mixed meters would bear careful rehearsal for either amateur or professional choirs. There is some especially nice solo work in the *Kyrie*. Anyone who has sung on a recording knows the pressure placed on soloists, take after take, and I was a bit disappointed that these singers' names were not listed on either disc. I can see that Dan Locklair is a much more prolific composer than I had realized, and it sounds like those commissioning works from him are definitely getting their money's worth. Something about Dr. Locklair's compositional style can enable a four-part texture to sound thick and expansive, making a number of his anthems accessible for smaller church choirs. I find his choral music rewarding to sing and striking and enjoyable to listen to, and I think this recording could be a valuable resource for church musicians and teachers alike. I look forward to hearing more and more of his works either live or on disc.

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