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LOCKLAIR Choral Music • 1David Pegg, 2Robert Russell, cond; 1Bel Canto Company; 2Ch Arts Society • MSR 1463 (2 CDs: 132:12)

Back in my active collecting days, I'd encountered the music of Dan Locklair only a couple times, there being a recital of his music on the Orion LP label, and the odd work here and there on other labels such as Opus One. I'd liked what I heard, but until the present two-CD set arrived from Fanfare central, I'd not had an opportunity to sample such a selection of his works at one sitting. The North Carolina-born (1949) composer has written for a wide variety of genres, and is no stranger to the pages of Fanfare. Reviews of his music may be found in 14:2, 29:4, and 31:3 and elsewhere. He is likely best known for his sacred choral music, and his Brief Mass has been particularly widely performed.

The comprehensive selection of 15 choral works in this set shows the composer's skill in a variety of styles. His music is all tonal, but there is a breadth of tonal idioms in his work such that interest never flags through the course of this collection. His more tonally focused music, examples of which include the "Nunc dimittis" from Holy Canticles of 1996 or the "Bay Bank" from Windswept, often fills in triadic chordal harmony with an added second, fourth, or sixth, a device commonly encountered in much contemporary American choral music, notably that of Morten Lauridsen or Eric Whitacre. Where appropriate to the text, Locklair utilizes rhythms in splendid fashion as well, the set's opening Magnificat or the Alleluia Dialogues being good examples. In the latter work, the text consists of only the word "Alleluia," but it becomes broken into fragments that are tossed around from one section of the choir to the other in almost pointillistic fashion, employing exuberant vitality.

One of the more novel works in this collection is Instant Culture from 1985, which is described as a choral drama. This genre has the choir as the protagonist, even though individual characters are called upon to speak or sing during the course of the work. The present work involves a composer who ruminates about his work, and receives feedback about it from the chorus. The music is full of instantly recognizable quotes from famous pieces, including the "Hallelujah Chorus." It's all a lot of fun, as is the following On Cats, a setting of poems about cats (large and small) by poets such as Vachel Lindsay and J. R. R. Tolkien. As a confirmed ailurophile, I found this work particularly attractive in its humor, spiky harmonies, and cat-like effects (one of the songs closes with a most emphatic "meow").

Another particularly appealing cycle is Windswept (1992), a setting of poetry of the composer's fellow North Carolinian, A. R. Ammons (1926–2001). The setting is scored for chorus, piano, and woodwind quintet, and in the composer's hands most effectively portrays wind in its various manifestations. Certain portions of the piece want to make me put on my sweater, even though I'm writing this in the middle of a sultry Indiana summer! Its last movement even calls upon the chorus to whistle, as do sections of two other pieces in this recital.

Two conductors and choirs are employed in this set. The first disc utilizes the Bel Canto Company, led by choirmaster David Pegg, and the second employs Robert Russell directing The Choral Art Society. Both conductors and groups bring off these works to very good effect, with plenty of enthusiasm where it's called for, as well as accuracy of intonation. However, the sound of the chorus on each disc differs a good bit. That on the Bel Canto CD sounds rough around the edges, and is rather closely miked. Whether the miking, mixing, vocal production, venue, or another factor or combination of factors has contributed to this effect is difficult for me to say, but it's not bad enough to detract from the music in any significant way. The Choral Art Society achieves a better blend and general sound, possibly in part because of more distant microphone placing or a better recording venue, but the better blend comes at the expense of clarity of diction, and understandability of texts. With texts provided, this is not a serious drawback either.

Fans of contemporary choral music will not want to pass up this set, nor will the adventurous repertory collector who remains attracted to tonality. Recommended accordingly.

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