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STEPHEN CHATMAN'S

One part experimental composer, one part choral craftsman, Stephen Chatman reveals the unique harmony of his musical double-life

EMMA

When Stephen Chatman was a student of composition at the University of Michigan, he was devoted to exploring the boundaries of contemporary music — a pursuit his teachers and peers encouraged. And he was really good at it; he won three consecutive BMI awards for student composers, the only North American to do this. He created atonal, virtuosic compositions that require technical excellence to perform and demand a lot of the listener as well. In 1976, he became a professor at UBC's School of Music and continued his experimental work.

But in his spare time, Chatman began to develop another interest, one that he kept quiet: "At a certain point in the early 1980s, I started writing these very traditional choral works. And at first I was ashamed that I was writing these pieces and certainly didn't want to show them to my colleagues, or other composers. But I didn't mind showing them to choir directors. And with each choral work, there seemed to be some kind of spinoff. Two choir directors in Vancouver, James Fankhauser and Jon Washburn, kept asking for more pieces, so I'd do one or two a year. I had my two styles — I had my very traditional, tonal choral style, and I had my more experimental, instrumental style, virtuosic and complicated."

As music publishers and choir directors came calling, he embraced his success as a composer of choral work. The demand for his choral compositions grew, especially in the United States. While Canadian choirs are familiar with his repertoire, the US became the biggest market for his work — about half of his commissions come from there. Now, American choir directors recognize him as a Canadian composer, with no awareness of his early origins. This is something that Chatman finds a bit ironic: "I'm an American immigrant, but I've become a Canadian composer and am considered a Canadian composer by Americans. My publisher in Boston thinks of me as a Canadian composer."

Chatman moves easily between the two cultures and enjoys his role in bringing Canadian music to American audiences: "We are always complaining about importing American culture, but I'm exporting Canadian culture in a big way, and I'm proud of that. There aren't many classical composers who are doing this, and they tend to be choral composers."

Chatman has tapped into an area of growth and opportunity for his work; he says the appetite for choral music is growing across North America, including Canada. Over the past 10 or 15 years, a lot of amateur choirs have been formed. He points out that in Vancouver there used to be only two or three choirs, but now there are at least 10. And similar growth can be seen across the continent.

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Stephen Chatman has received support from The Hampton Fund.

Happily for Chatman, the choral music scene has blossomed, and choirs are commissioning and performing contemporary music. It’s not likely to be highly experimental music; as Chatman explains, choir directors tend to choose music they think will appeal to their choir and to their audience. It’s likely to be tonal and more accessible.

But all of his success in the world of choral composition has not eclipsed his more experimental work; he continues to compose instrumental pieces that meet with acclaim. One recent composition, “From Pent-Up Aching Rivers,” was created on commission for well-known Vancouver violinist Gwen Thompson. She premiered the piece in December 2004, at a concert at New York’s Carnegie Hall. The work is challenging; it’s written for an unusual duo of violin and cello. And its first performance faced challenges of its own; just before the premiere, the cellist backed out of the concert. While this could have been a disaster, Chatman says the change was lucky: “It turned out for the better, because the substitute was a young, up-and-coming cellist, Clancey Newman, who won the Naumberg Award last year. He was fantastic and learned it in six or seven days. The performance was sold out, they turned people away ... and the audience just loved it.” Chatman now plans to bring Newman to Vancouver in May to record the piece.

Chatman has created four CDs of his work; the latest, *Vancouver Visions*, was released in January 2006. It features recordings of his instrumental work and, with one exception, the performances were recorded in the UBC recital hall. One of the tracks, “Lawren S. Harris Suite for Piano Quintet,” was inspired by the famous Canadian artist who lived just outside the gates of UBC for 30 years. Another CD, *Proud Music of the Storm*, was a particular success. One track, “Tara’s Dream,” was short-

listed for the BBC Masterprize in 2001; Chatman is the first Canadian to be a finalist for this award. The title track, “Proud Music of the Storm,” was given the 2005 Western Canadian Music Award for Outstanding Classical Composition. One reason Chatman is so thrilled by the success of this work is the recognition it brings to UBC: “It was broadcast nationally 12 or 13 times on CBC radio last year and every time it played, the UBC orchestra and UBC singers were credited. It’s a real accomplishment for everyone, and a milestone, and a first.” This achievement is rare. Only a few Canadian orchestral recordings are made each year. Chatman says McGill is the only other university in Canada to release an orchestral recording.

Chatman considers his music to be a form of art, and he points out that it’s often difficult to categorize art as research. But, he says, UBC has a long tradition of including the creative arts within the scope of academic research, an attitude Chatman describes as “enlightened.” In fact, the UBC Hampton Fund offered support for the creation of *Proud Music of the Storm* as a major creative research project. He hopes its success will encourage other composers also to seek support from the Hampton Fund.

After two decades of leading a musical double life, producing both virtuosic instrumental compositions and traditional choral music, Chatman’s biggest challenge now is meeting the demand for his work. But whatever he’s focused on, his inspiration arises from his sense of his audience: “I’m just following my instincts — trying to produce something I find attractive, that other people might find attractive too. It’s true of other artists, also — you want to be excited about what you’re making. Just like Lawren Harris, it has everything to do with feeling this joyous reaction on the part of the viewer. That’s the excitement.” ■