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Da Camera Singers

Da Camera Singers performs works by Valley composers

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MUSIC REVIEW

The da Camera Singers of Amherst celebrated its 40th anniversary by sponsoring two performances last week of five choral works that the group has commissioned over the past five years. The first concert was at St. John's Episcopal Church in Northampton, coinciding with a blast of snow and ice which prevented your correspondent from attending. The second concert, in Buckley Recital Hall at Amherst College, attracted a full house, whose festive atmosphere encouraged the singers to give exciting performances.

Eric Sawyer's "Anterooms" was the 2013 commission, set to six poems by Pulitzer Prize winner Richard Wilbur, a local resident. The start was precarious, with a few pizzicato notes from Joel Pichon's violin as accompaniment, but the firm conducting of Sheila Heffernon gave reassurance to the singers, whose performance was solid, and in the last poem, "Out Here," matched Wilbur's New England wit.

The 2012 commission was by Gregory Brown, who set a text from 1575, "Vidi Aquam" ("I Saw Water"), which has nothing to do with the "Vidi Aquam" of the Latin Mass. Being translated into English from a French version of an Italian devotional text, it required the composer to set long paragraphs of prose whose

connecting themes were nature observed and, within nature, water. His singers sustained the three demanding sections of the music concluding with repeated Alleluias.

Ronald Pereray set "North Country," five poems by Robert Frost. Their theme was self-concealment and, in the central poem, revelation. The music was perfectly fitted to the poetry, occasionally dissonant and more often delicate and clear, in keeping with the beautiful conclusion of "Going for Water" (the last poem), "We heard, we knew we heard the brook." The chorus was the Northfield Mount Hermon Singers, whose young voices and disciplined performance were the musical and emotional highlight of the concert.

Karen Tarlow, commissioned

for 2010, set "Be My Love," a version of Shakespeare's lyric, "Come live with me and be my love," with the despondent reply by Walter Raleigh. Tarlow met the challenge of setting a well-known text, set to music in Shakespeare's time and, no doubt, many times since. To the piano accompaniment of Marianne Lockwood she added a clarinet, played by Hannah Berube with great sensitivity that matched the changing moods of the words and the music. The skilled Pioneer Valley Capella was the chorus.

The final settings were those of Lewis Spratlan, nine poems of former U.S. poet laureate Kay Ryan. They began with the quasi-geological "Elephant Rocks," linking nature's ancient forms with human activity, and ended with "All Shall Be Restored," in which natural objects and human writing disintegrate and are restored, for "Restoration knows no half-measure." Spratlan's ingenious music met the complexity and wit of Ryan's poetry.

During the intermission Sen. Stan Rosenberg, D-Amherst, presented the da Camera Singers with a proclamation, unanimously approved by members of the state legislature, praising the group's work over the 40 years of its existence. Indeed, we in the Pioneer Valley can be proud that among our fellow citizens are such gifted composers and performers, whose music is an essential part of our common life.