

Da Camera Singers get poetic

'Nothing Shall Be Lost' opens Friday in a free concert at NMH's new Rhodes Arts Center

"When you sing with a group of people, you learn how to subsume yourself into a group consciousness because a capella singing is all about the immersion of the self into the community. That's one of the great feelings — to stop being me for a little while and to become us."

— Brian Eno, composer on NPR's "This I Believe"

How do you paint lumbering elephants — or the glassy scuttling of crustaceans — in sound? And not just with any sounds, but those made by human voices? And how to convincingly limn, in music, lunar reflections on the poignancy of life? Or the fate of an imperiled planet?

Pulitzer-Prize winning composer Lewis Spratlan was confident he was "the little composer that could" when he became an instant captive of Kay Ryan's art upon reading a book of her poems sent to him by the Da Camera Singers' president Frank Convere. So confident, in fact, that he upped the ante from the original suggestion of five poems to performing nine. Obviously, he was smitten.

In a program whose title is taken from the concluding poem in the Ryan cycle "Nothing Shall Be Lost," the singers will be sharing their new wares Friday, Jan. 30, at 8 p.m., at the just-christened Rhodes Arts Center at Northfield Mount Hermon School in Gill, and Wednesday, Feb. 4, at Buckley Recital Hall, Amherst College, also at 8 p.m. The composer will be there — for thunderous applause or rotten tomatoes — for both occasions.

Among the other poets are Sara Teasedale and the "Belle of Amherst"— Emily Dickinson. As for the tunesmiths, there are the iconic Aaron Copland, local legend Alice Parker, Frank Ticheli and Timothy Snyder.

In a recent phone chat, Spratlan spoke about his work with almost reflexive rapidity, often jump starting



Submitted photo

The title of the program is taken from the concluding poem in Kate Ryan's cycle, "Nothing Shall Be Lost." Above, the Da Camera Singers.

his thoughts while still in mid-stream. He conversed with the crisp assurance of a seasoned academic — sparing any emotive excesses, like any good Yankee, for more private moments.

"I found (Ryan's) work perceptive, witty and fresh ... I hadn't known of her before, but I was so taken — I could have made a piece of the original five; many of them are not long poems, but they're extremely chewy, extremely substantial — that I wanted to set more than five. My model for the last piece, which is by far the longest, was Brahms' "Liebeslieder Waltzes," where you have all of these waltzes climaxed by one that's much, much longer."

When asked to take a stab at describing his style, Spratlan hesitated a few beats and said, "It's complicated but beguiling." Still, a pre-listening of three segments e-mailed by the composer reveals the music it to be quite simply constructed after all, with a preference for soft dissonances sliding in parallel motion, and conjuring a sustained reverie-like atmosphere.

The Da Camera Singers are overseen by Sheilah Heffernon, who also serves as the Performing Arts chairwoman and choral-vocal director of Northfield Mount Hermon's music department. A pixie-voiced colleen with a Valkyrian work ethic, Heffernon is known as a *perfectionista* in the rehearsal hall — by turns a beloved teacher and bracing taskmistress, as required.

The term "da camera" (literally "of the chamber") may seem a bit highbrow to some, but it really translates out to mean "room-friendly" or

"cozy-of-space." Alas, "chamber music" can still conjure all sorts of unfortunate associations — imprisonment and torture, for example. And while many of us have been to performances we felt to be torturous performances and imprisoned, this was, I'm sure, far from the original intent of its creators.

I met with Heffernon recently for a tour of the Rhodes complex:

JM: How did the Da Camera group come about?

SH: It was started by a group of people from the Amherst area — mostly professors from Amherst College, Mount Holyoke and Smith.

JM: And have you been with them all along?

SH: No, no — at that point, it was starting when I was in college. I was lucky enough to start with the group and this is my third year working with them.

JM: How many are there in the group?

SH: About 28 to 32 — it's a chamber choir, it's the ideal size for people who love to sing and want to feel as though they're really contributing making music in an intimate, personal way. They love to sing, they work hard ... it certainly is a group that cares deeply about what its doing, and cares about doing it well.

JM: I imagine you're actually discussing some of the aesthetics of the music — the construction, background, and so on — as you have a musically intelligent group to work with?

SH: Absolutely, absolutely ... For me, obviously, text is supreme; it's

Program notes

"Nothing Shall Be Lost."

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Free, donations welcome

what draws me to choral music.

JM: About 20 years ago, I wrote a song cycle on the poems of Emily Dickinson. I didn't realize until after I'd written it just how pithy Dickinson's poetry is, that part of the challenge is that it goes by so quickly that you don't mine its depth. Music may be the ideal thing because it expands that "pith" in time.

SH: That's really true.

JM: Is that what (composer) Lewis (Spratlan) is doing in his cycle?

SH: Definitely. "Mined" the poetry, I love that word that you used, because that's exactly what he's done. He's managed to take the words that Kay Ryan wrote and keep them hers, so her voice is still honest. He hasn't changed anything and he's just brought it to life. The first one is called "Elephant Rocks." It's a beautiful poem invoking our sense of the fact that this ancient animal has managed to survive no matter what human beings have done to it ... you know how an elephant has this uneven, rocking gate ... so he (Spratlan) opens it up by creating this sound the basses are doing (singing, low and heavily) boo-bee-beem, boom-beem, boom-bee, boom-beem-beem ...

JM: It sounds — the way you hummed it — like a ground bass (a constantly repeating low musical pattern) over which he might bring in the upper layers.

SH: It does, exactly; My son, who sings at Wesleyan, said, "It looks like a dew-oop song!"

The concert is open to the public at large and is free of charge; there will be the opportunity for a freewill offering.

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