

Human honesty

Da Camera Singers concerts include premiere of Alice Parker work

"If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry."

— Emily Dickinson

The Da Camera Singers "Women's Voices Through the Ages" will feature music by female composers with works ranging from the ninth century right up to the present with a world premiere by Hawley resident Alice Parker; Sheila Hefneron will be directing.

Three performances will be given, the first at Charlemont Federated Church on Friday, May 29, at 8 p.m., the second at the First Congregational Church in Amherst, Saturday, May 30, at 8 p.m., and the last on Sunday, May 31, at Helen Hills Hills Chapel at Smith College, Parker's alma mater, at 3 p.m. There will be a reception tour and readings of the poems at the Emily Dickinson Homestead, 280 Main St., Amherst, prior to the Amherst concert at 7 p.m. Saturday.

The Parker work is "Heavenly Hurt," a setting of six poems by Emily Dickinson. Of all famed American poetry, Dickinson's is arguably the most concentrated and distilled: touch one of her seemingly humble mini-phrases and it instantly expands to fill heaven and earth, downloading a world of meaning and depth out of all proportion to its brevity and chastity.

This was clearly a woman who suffered long and protracted artistic soul-searching before giving birth to her tightly wound creations, creations that, in their spinsterish sparseness, all but hide their native glory and genius. Like almost-blossomed buds, they need our patience and persistence in allowing their enfolded, encoded insight to fully unfurl itself.

But the apple of art can never fall far from the tree of the artist, and by all reports, Dickinson was a curious blend of modest and daring, of few but prescient words, a spirit who enacted the semblance of outward propriety and humility while at the same time piercing to the essence of the human heart with almost surgical precision.

By contrast, the art of a more elliptical poet like Robert Frost is infinitely more approachable and consoling, or that of Edna St. Vincent Millay, more lyrical and rapturous. But nobody could get in, set off the explosives hidden in the heart and get out — not unlike a moral SWAT team — with greater skill than petite, harmless Emily Dickinson.

For this reason, music tends to serve the poet very well, as I had occasion to learn several decades ago in setting a song cycle to both poems and letters by the poet. It had the effect of ventilating the density of her thoughts, and of

expanding over longer arcs of time what might have taken a reader a mere second to glimpse — or, with regard to veiled inner meanings, miss.

I spoke recently with Pioneer Valley icon and composer Alice Parker, now verging upon her 90th year and still very much active.

JM: How did the piece come about?



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AP: The Da Camera Singers asked me to write a piece for them. I was delighted and they were delighted that I wanted to do Emily Dickinson poems, because I think I would rather set her poetry than anybody else I can think of. And I said I'd love to do it. They gave me free range and I could choose the performing forces and the poems. And as I started looking through the poems, the ones that were concerned with love and loss came out to me very vividly and I realized that that's what I would like to do. This is a selection of

seven poems — not ones that she put together, but chosen from the entire collection of almost 1,800 poems. They talk about love and loss from different points of view and they're usually very short poems — which I just love — and so my pieces are short. The whole work, "Heavenly Hurt," is seven movements and the poems come out, I think, in the music, very much as I would read them, with that kind of word stress and very little repetition. It's scored for chorus, cello and piano.

JM: I know most of her poems don't have titles, but what are some of the first lines by which to identify them?

AP: The first is, "There's a certain slant of light ..." and then the second one, "The Bustle in A House," is about cleaning up the house after a death (quoting):

"The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity —"

JM: Wow ...

AP: ... Yes.

JM: She's the densest poet I know ...

AP: Yes.

JM: And you really have to ventilate her words.

AP: Right, she suggests much more than she gives.

JM: And so I think music is perfect for her.

AP: It is.

JM: Because a lot is lost in reading them too quickly.

AP: Right. People just read them for information. And all of these poems are such a wonderful combination of hymn forms in a very simple common meter



The Da Camera Singers "Women's Voices Through the Ages" concerts Friday, Saturday and Sunday, will include the world premiere of "Heavenly Hurt" by Hawley resident Alice Parker, a nationally known composer who is pictured above. Parker's work is a setting of six poems by Emily Dickinson, pictured below.



(beat-emphasis pattern) and four-line verses. She hints at these huge subjects in this very gentle, quiet language — no show. So, that's the second one, like a little minuet. The third is "Under the light, yet under ..." which lists all the things that are under the ground and then all the things above the earth — the distance between which is nothing compared to the distance between the living and the dead. And then, the fourth one. The title is "Behind Me Dips Eternity," three verses

and she's kind of lost, standing caught between Eternity and Immortality. The fifth movement is "A Shade Upon the Mind" — talking upon the kind of shade that comes upon you when you lose someone you love — and it ends with this cry: "Oh God, why give — if you must take away the Loved?" And that goes into, without stopping, "There is A Pain So Utter, It Swallows Substance Up." So, she's just at the lowest ebb of human pain and grief.

JM: Wow, just the lines you've quoted are searing enough ...

AP: Yes, I know, I know; it really is just amazing. I got to thinking of requiems and all the language that's used in the more traditional requiems — certainly the Catholic ones but even in Brahms. But, none of them have this kind of human honesty to them, where you're really living the whole thing through.

JM: Having lived as long as you have, you must have had ample opportunity to experience much of what she's writing about.

AP: Oh yes, I've lived it! But there's one more to come: the seventh one is, "The Love a Life Can Show Below" and goes on to say "is but a filament, I know, of that diviner thing." And then, the end of this one are these incredible lines with — I counted them — 11 verbs: "Tis this — invites — appalls — endows — Flits — glimmers — proves — dissolves — Returns — suggests — convicts, enchants." Love is what keeps striking us all in these different ways as we live here ... Then, (she) flings in "Paradise," so that we live with all this confusion and agony and, all of a sudden, when we least expect it, here's this incredible glimpse of Paradise. So that's the last word — Paradise.

The Amherst concert will be preceded by reception at 280 Main St. (\$10, \$5 for museum members). A donation for the concert is appreciated. For further information, call Judson Brown at 413-584-1948 or 202-857-7221. For information about the reception, call 413-542-8161.

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