



# America Singing

by Marcia Young

*What's red and white  
and blue all over?  
Among other things,  
this year's concert programs  
by Cantus and The Western  
Wind vocal ensembles.*

Now in its second season, the NEA's *American Masterpieces: Chamber Music* initiative has already proved a boon to U.S. composers, performers, school groups, and concertgoers. A glance at the CMA website (and at the 17-month performance calendar starting on page 132 of this issue) will attest to the variety of ensembles and presenters that have been awarded grants, as well as the wide range of uses to which the funds have been applied, as multifarious as the program's namesake nation.

The Western Wind, a group with an active commissioning program going back 40 years, had the perfect program already in place and were eager to disseminate it. The grant enabled a radio broadcast and a variety of live performances of "O Beautiful! American Music"—a program anchored by a set of folk hymns from the Colonial period and embracing new 21st-century pieces written specifically for this ensemble.

The earliest music publications in

America were hymn collections—starting with William Billings's influential *The England Psalm Singer*, of 1770. Billings was a tanner, an itinerant singing teacher, and a self-taught musician of rare originality: a seminal figure whose influence spread southward along the Appalachian chain and eventually westward across America. Billings and his fellow New Englander Jeremiah Ingles are represented on this program in their hymn tunes "Euroclydon" and "Honor to the Hills" (Ingles's adaptation of a ballad tune, "Captain Kid"). The hymn "Bound for the Promised Land" is believed to be the first piece ever published in North America by a woman, one "Miss M. Durham."

The strong and simple outlines of this opening set serve to frame the rest of the program, which surveys 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21st-century chamber vocal works from a wide variety of traditions—including popular and jazz works by Gershwin, Ellington, Bernstein, Brian Wilson, Billy Joel—and an array of commissions and arrangements from "art

music” composers with whom The Western Wind has forged alliances over the years.

“O Beautiful!” proved adaptable for school groups and workshops, as well as for concert audiences. A Western Wind Workshop performance at Bennington College on Columbus Day weekend provided the ideal opportunity to introduce the full-length, splendidly manifold program. “This was part of a residency,” said William Zukof, a founding member of The Western Wind. “In addition to the workshop itself we went into local high schools, did a couple of concerts, and gave a lecture-demonstration on the New England Singing School movement.” On another occasion, at the New-York Historical Society, The Western Wind swung emphasis away from the 18th century and turned in a solidly contemporary version of the program—for a packed house.

One of The Western Wind’s longtime composer allies is William Bolcom. “Bill I met at a party at [composer] Eric Saltzman’s house back in 1967 or so,” said Zukof.

“He was playing brilliant piano rags. When he found out that we were doing the 1594 madrigal comedy *Amfiparnasso*, he came to the performance and brought his producer from Nonesuch. *Amfiparnasso* had been one of his favorite pieces since he was 12.... He used to hang out in the Seattle Public Library, looking at scores.” *Satires for madrigal group*, a set of five songs, resulted from this encounter, and two are included in this program. “We didn’t even pay,” said Zukof. “Nobody knew who he was. This was decades before his Pulitzer prize.”

The madrigal comedy, a regrettably short-lived 16th-century tradition, has found new life in another, very recent Western Wind commission performed on the ensemble’s *American Masterpieces* series: Eric Saltzman’s *Jukebox in the Tavern of Love*. “There’s lots of hoquet,” said Zukof, “very difficult.” True to the genre’s antic, narrative character, Saltzman’s piece is set in a New York bar during a blackout. The singers represent a clutch of characters—from a rabbi to a Broadway hooper to a Con Ed worker.

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Ronald Gold made a gift to The Western Wind of a three-piece set titled *Bop Prophets*, based on texts by the 1950s “Beat” poets William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg. “These poems cry out with love and contempt for these United States at mid-century,” wrote Gold. His setting of Kerouac’s “Mexico Fellaheen,” underlain by a Latin beat, expresses Kerouac’s empathy with the “pure land,” as well as his heady sense of border-crossing escape from uptight 1950s America.

The impetus behind Matthew Harris’s lyrical barcarolle “Sweet and Low” was the name of the ensemble itself. Harris searched the Internet for texts referring to, well, the Western wind (“...Wind of the western sea...”). His setting combines intricately interlacing vocal lines with a touching simplicity of utterance that honors Tennyson’s verse. This piece, too, was presented as a gift to The Western Wind.

The *Ur*-minimalist Philip Glass is here too, in an excerpt from the 1981 film score *Koyaanisqatsi* (from the Hopi, “life out of balance”). Meredith Monk (accurately described as “a magician of the voice”) is represented in her “Basket Rondo” from 2008. Visual elements are strong in Monk’s aesthetic. Here, her vision of a pre-industrial work ethic—people working in co-operation—finds expression in the textless interweaving of vocal lines.

The Western Wind has always numbered talented arrangers and composers among its own members. Founding member Elliot Z. Levine, described as the group’s “composer-

in-captivity,” originally set e.e. cummings’s sonnet “i thank You God for most this amazing day” for a workshop at the Mark Twain Junior High School on Coney Island. Viewing the poem as a sort of “modern psalm,” Levine created an appealing arrangement with lively rhythms supporting the poem’s joyous, celebratory message. (The much-performed arrangement has become a particular hit with choirs in Asia.)

Tenor Richard Slade’s Gershwin arrangement (“There’s a Boat That’s Leavin’ Soon for New York”) and a clever pastiche, “America/Route 66,” by former member Gayla Morgan, are program highlights. Billy Joel’s “And So It Goes,” a natural crowd-pleaser, caused a bit of cross-genre confusion at the *New York Times*. (Zukof received an e-mail from the Culture Desk declaring its intention to list the performance, but requesting that Billy Joel’s name be removed because the listings editor would not know what to do with the item.)

“Once you get past the details,” said Zukof, ““O Beautiful!’ covers a fascinating repertoire that is not grounded in any one school of composition. “If anything, it crosses boundaries. Like Tania [León]’s piece [*Batý*], which so wonderfully integrates Afro-Cuban music with what we do.” A Latin dance beat is vigorously present in this winning excerpt, whose title, says León, refers to the central gathering place of the “Africanos” on a plantation.

“O Beautiful! American Music” was originally aired as a July 4 American music special in 2008 and will continue to be broadcast via PRX (Public Radio Exchange). A CD of the program is currently in post-production and will be available for downloading on The Western Wind website.

Cantus, the Twin Cities-based men’s vocal ensemble, applied its *American Masterpieces* grant to an ambitious in-school program. Tenor and artistic co-director Aaron Humble explained, “We worked with three schools—one rural, one urban, one suburban. We visited each one, and then sent a trio of guys to do classroom work on vocal tech-

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nique—encouraging a sound that is more released, more grounded, into the body. We did sound work with some of their repertoire, plus we did pieces we would be working on with them.”

Cantus visited each school six times over the course of a year. At year’s end, all the schools came together for a final session and performance. “We allowed each chorus to do a couple of pieces on its own,” said Humble, “and we performed a couple of pieces ourselves. Then everyone collaborated on a number of pieces.” But what really set the process apart from ordinary workshops was the students’ participation in creating a new work—*Any Given Day*—commissioned for this occasion from Minneapolis-based composer Maura Bosch.

Bosch has developed fascinating ways of generating text for her vocal works. “She walked through the hallways to hear what

kids were saying,” explains Humble. “She did some exercises with the kids to get them to produce text for her. When it came time to put the piece together, you could hear kids in the different choirs saying, ‘This part is from our school.’” Like speech in everyday life, the texts in the piece ran the gamut from the trivial to the profound; and Bosch and her subjects created beauty, meaning and immediacy from could be termed “found poetry.”

“Maura likes to use text that is not necessarily verse,” says Humble. “Her music is pretty innovative, for vocal music. It can remind you of a music box. She was a student of Milton Babbitt—and you can hear that in some of her work. But she makes her texts so accessible that the pieces become accessible to audiences generally.”

During the year of the Cantus residency, one of the schools lost a student to illness. “On a certain day, everyone wore his fav-

orite color,” says Humble. “The hallways were a big sea of green.” As students spoke of their loss, their emotion became a part of Bosch’s piece. “Other times, the comments expressed more mundane feelings and desires: ‘I can’t wait to break up with that creep,’ ‘I can’t wait to get my car back,’ ‘I want to hang out with my friends.’ For these kids, singing their own text, it was a new experience in individual, personal expression—like singing a text by, say, Walt Whitman.” How very American.

*Marcia Young is a New York-based music journalist.*

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