

# Major new work from Fussell

**By Peter Dobrin, Inquirer Music Critic, October 27, 2003**

Charles Fussell's *High Bridge* is the kind of work you like the moment you meet it. Not that it's easy to listen to. It takes work to make sense of its complex orchestral part, to figure out why the four fine vocal soloists interact the way they do, not to mention what to make of a knotty, moody text by the American poet Hart Crane.

But what immediately strikes you about the work, premiered Saturday night at Philadelphia Cathedral by the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia to open its 130th season, is that it is a work of great substance. Owing its existence in part to the Philadelphia Music Project, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Mendelssohnians have gotten themselves, and the entire choral field, a major new work that deserves to be discovered and rediscovered.

Fussell, a Boston University professor, has twice before written for this strong local chorus, and four times before has used the words of Crane in his work. He does with poetry what the best of composers do: He avoids literalism at all cost. Never do you see, say, a cat referred to in the text, and then immediately hear violins in cheap intimation. Connections between words and sounds, he knows, are better made in more subtle ways. And so he leaves it up to the listener in "The Harbor Dawn" to slowly discover himself awash in a movement of blue-gray misty textures, to guess the meaning of white-water orchestral turbulence, and wonder whether the twinkle of sound at the very end is a star piercing the fog. In this way, and in his rating on the dissonance meter, he is much like Benjamin Britten.

Stylistically, Fussell is an original, though in the "Indiana" movement he turns to a decidedly American sound, more in the Barber than Copland mode, using reassuring harmonies and facile orchestrations. He also obviously knows how to make a chorus' words understood (some composers layer forces together too heavily for word comprehension), a benefit greatly enhanced by the large and extremely able chorus. The Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia mostly met the demands of the score, though not all of the playing was entirely confident.

The four soloists - soprano Tamara Matthews, mezzo Lorie Gratis, tenor William Hite, and baritone Sanford Sylvan - were evenly matched and in full command. Matthews was especially thrilling in her very high-very quiet moments, and Sylvan brought to his part rich sounds in a variety of colors.

Alan Harler, the group's music director, completed the program with Vaughan Williams' *Toward the Unknown Region* for orchestra and chorus, which overwhelmed the resonant

West Philadelphia church, and with *Fog Tropes* by Ingram Marshall, one of this country's most important composers.

Marshall's piece is not for chorus at all, but for a sextet of brass players and a tape of sounds collected from San Francisco Bay in 1979 plus (also on tape) a Balinese flute and "falsettos keenings." The brass repeat their figures over the wind, foghorns, some birds. It's a hypnotic 10 minutes, as central to our understanding of what constitutes music as it was when it was written more than 20 years ago.

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