

# A Singing World: Our Multicultural Concert Series

**Performed May 1, 1999**

Mendelssohn Club concludes its 125th Anniversary Season with a celebration of one of its most significant initiatives, its multicultural and multiethnic concert series. The series began in 1990 with a concert entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom*, which traced the history of American sacred music from colonial times to the twentieth century and featured as guest artists the Clayton White Singers, who performed a set of Spirituals. This concert contained a number of features which have formed common threads in the subsequent multicultural concerts. One was to celebrate and showcase the cultural diversity which enriches the Delaware Valley, and the guest ensembles all have strong local connections. There were other connections as well. The concert was performed at the historic Mother Bethel A.M.E. church, one of the first Black congregations in America and an important station on the Underground Railroad. It is only recently that it has become widely appreciated that many Spirituals had a double meaning and were used as a code to coordinate movement along the Underground Railroad. And the major work on that program, Randall Thompson's *The Peaceable Kingdom*, also had Philadelphia resonances. Thompson was for a number of years head of the Curtis Institute, and the "peaceable kingdom" theme of harmony, toleration and coexistence was a popular one with colonial Pennsylvania preachers and folk artists, as well as a particularly appropriate theme for a multicultural concert.

Over the years the concerts have featured guest artists including the Philadelphia Korean-American Choir, Coral Cantigas of Washington, D.C., the Chinese Musical Voices, Ming De Chorus, Monmouth (N.J.) Chinese Chorus, Bright Hope Baptist Church Celestial Choir, the Beth Sholom Adult Chorale and the Adath Jeshurun Congregation Choir, many of whom have been able to join Mendelssohn Club for this celebration. The 1995 holiday concert *Golden Voices of the East* featured Rachmaninoff's *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* performed as the composer intended, with the musical sections linked by chant provided by Russian Orthodox priest Father John Bohush and Deacon Matthew Bohush, and with program text written in both English and Cyrillic.

The success of these multicultural concerts is reflected in the fact that Mendelssohn Club was the only non-Chinese chorus invited to participate in a concert at the Academy of Music celebrating the 125th Anniversary of Philadelphia's Chinatown in 1995. Mendelssohn Club was also the only non-synagogue choir invited to participate in the gala Hear O Israel 50th Anniversary of Israel Celebration at the First Union Center in 1998, featuring the Philadelphia Orchestra under Wolfgang Sawallisch and the Israel Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta. Most significant of all, Mendelssohn Club was honored with a 1996 Human Rights Award from the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations for "bringing the community together in song through its multicultural concerts."

## Our Commissioning Series

*Symphony (of Light)* was commissioned and premiered by Mendelssohn Club in 1995 for a multicultural program called *The Forgotten Generation, Choral Music of African-American Composers*. Composer Jonathan Holland was at the time still a student at the Curtis Institute, but he was already making a name for himself as a composer, with works performed by the St. Louis Symphony and Cleveland and Philadelphia Orchestras. He has won awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, ASCAP, the Presser Foundation, the Detroit Symphony/ Unisys African-American Composers Forum and the National Black Arts Festival/ Atlanta Symphony Competition. Holland took his text from a poem by Frank Horne, a prominent Black poet who, like many of the composers featured in *The Forgotten Generation*, was associated with the Harlem Renaissance. The quick movements of dancing light are juxtaposed with the labored movement of crippled limbs, which Holland also sees as a metaphor for slavery. The image of the dancing light is wonderfully captured by the brilliant, staccato piano writing and the detached setting of the text.

*Specimen Days* is a five-movement work for soloists, chorus and orchestra commissioned and premiered by Mendelssohn Club in 1992 in celebration of the centennial of the death of poet Walt Whitman. The title comes from one of Whitman's books, a sort of combination journal and autobiography largely devoted to his experiences during the Civil War. Whitman spent a good deal of time in the hospitals, visiting the wounded soldiers, writing letters for them and acting as an unofficial nurse. The experience was profoundly moving for him and found its way into many of his later poems. Composer Charles Fussell is Professor of Composition at Boston University, Artistic Director of Boston's New Music Harvest Festival and Director of the New England Composers' Orchestra. Librettist Will Graham, director of the Opera Institute at Boston University, selected text from Whitman's writings as well as original material.

The fourth movement of *Specimen Days* is in the form of an eloquent lament set for baritone and alto solo, which melts into a beautiful a cappella chorale for the chorus, *Word Over All*. The text is taken from Whitman's poem *Reconciliation* and contains some of the most consoling words ever written. Despite the horrors of death, injury and destruction which Whitman experienced during the Civil War, he still shared in that 19th century sense of optimism in progress and the perfectibility of man. Fussell ends the piece quietly with a false cadence, introducing a bit of tonal ambiguity which may reflect a more 20th century perspective of uncertainty.

*Songs of Sweet Accord* was commissioned and premiered in 1996 at a holiday concert entitled *Celestial Seasons*. The work was scored for men's voices and harp, and was meant to be a companion piece for Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, similarly scored for women's voices and harp. Composer [Don St. Pierre](#) is on the faculty of the Curtis Institute as a vocal and opera coach. He has previously been music director of the Skylight Opera Theater in Milwaukee, keyboard player for the Milwaukee Symphony, chorus master at the Vienna State Opera for a production of Bernstein's *A Quiet Place*, and head of the voice department at the Chautauqua Institution and the Bowdoin Summer

Music Festival. *Songs of Sweet Accord* are settings of traditional American folk hymns. *Captain Kidd* is set for three equal voices in which the vocal lines are interwoven with each other over a tango-like rhythm in the accompaniment. *More Love* is taken from an anonymous Shaker hymn and features an exquisite three-part harmonization over which is laid the hymn *We Gather Together* as a countermelody.

*La Rosa y el Colibri* was commissioned and premiered in 1992 in a multicultural concert entitled *Songs of the New World*. Composer Jack Délano (1914-1997) was a multitalented photojournalist, filmmaker, artist, composer, cartoonist and illustrator of children's books. Born in the Ukraine, he moved with his family to the United States at age eight. Shortly after graduating from art school, he was hired by the Farm Security Administration as one of several photographers assigned to create a record of rural and small town life in America, and to document the effects of America's war mobilization effort as well. Délano was sent to Puerto Rico in 1941 on assignment, and he became enchanted with both the land and its people. He settled in Puerto Rico in 1946, where he remained for the rest of his life. *La Rosa y el Colibri* (The Rose and the Hummingbird) is a whimsical setting of an equally whimsical poem by Puerto Rican poet Carmelina Vizcarrondo. The rapid passagework of the trumpet obligato suggests the rapid beating of the hummingbird's wings and the frequent, abrupt modulations mimic the darting of the hummingbird in flight.

## Notes on the Chinese Chorus's Musical Offerings

Joan McIntyre of Chinese Musical Voices has provided the following notes:

"Li Ch'i (ca. 713-741) was a native of Tung-ch'uan (eastern region of Sichuan province.) Received his Graduated-degree during the K'ai-yuan reign. He was transferred to Hsin-hsiang county to be its Military-official. Li has left behind collection of poems. Literary critiques rated his poetry written in Regulated-verse format equal in nobility to those of Kao Shih (?-764).

"Listening to Tung the Great Zitharist Playing... was written in the genre Seven-syllabic Ancient-verse. With the exception of line nine, missing one syllable/word, and lines seventeen and eighteen, each missing two syllables/ words, the present text in general follows the format Li had intended it to be. In spite of the possible misrepresentation of the original, the poem gives a heart-wrenching portrait of the tragic life of a lady who was caught in the chaos of a society troubled with wars and destruction.

"Yu-ti Huang (b. 1912) was born in Kao-yao county, Kuang-tung province. In 1934 he graduated from the National Chung-shan University with a B.A. in education. In the same year he passed the examination for overseas students who studied violin, and entered Trinity Conservatory in London. He received his degree from the Royal College of Music in 1955. In 1963, Huang received his graduate degree in musical composition from the Pontifical Institute of Music in the Vatican. The result of his six-year study and research is the publication of *Chinese Style Harmony and Musical Composition*.

"Huang has been a prolific composer of songs and choral music in particular. His sensitivity to the tonal quality of Chinese poetic phrasing enhanced the appreciation of the subject matter by the performers as well as the audience. Listening to *Tung the Great Zitherist* is a unique composite of recitations, sound of a musical instrument, and the harmony of vocal music.

"Li Pai (699-759) was born in the Ch'ang ming county of the ancient Shu kingdom. The ancient walled city of the county-seat is located southwest of the modern Yen-yuan county of Szu-chuan province. However, Li's ancestors, perhaps grandparents, once sojourned or lived in the northwestern Ch'eng-chi county, not far from the modern T'ien-shui county of Kansu province. It is an area on the route of the famous Silk Road leading to the central region of China from the western frontier, where numerous racial and ethnic minorities for centuries made their homes. During Li's sixty or so years of traveling and living in the China proper, he could have registered officially in different locales. Consequently, there are different recorded origins of his native land. Judging by his fluid styles with words- and poetic metaphors, one suspects he was multilingual as well. Some scholars suggested that Li could be maternally of Turkish origin, which tied in with his own comment in a letter sent to a friend named P'ei Chen,

"Pai originally had his home in Chin-lin ("Metallic-tumillus"). For generations had the Right-side surname (versus the Left-side Chit-ch's of the minority called Hsiung-nit.) Met with the catastrophe of Chu-ch'ii Menghstin (king of northern Liang dynasty,) escaped to live all over the territory of Ch'in. Wherever the official establishments, there the home. In youth grew up in the valley of the upper stream of Han river.

"If so, Li Pai could have grown up in the Basin of Hanchung, southern Shensi province, which is surrounded by the lofty Ch'in mountain range and by the Pa and Mi-ch'ang mountains bordering Szu-chuan province, Li's birthplace. Being protected by surrounding high mountains and rich with natural resources the area was ideal for safety seeking migrants. The landscape described in the *White Clouds Song* fits as a seamless heavenly garment."

## Final Pieces

In the face of escalating ethnic conflict and violence around the world today, it is particularly fitting that this multicultural, multi-ethnic celebration closes with an invocation for peace. Bach's *Dona Nobis Pacem* (grant us peace) is an expansive, five-part canon, insistently repeating that same text-over and over. *Sing Now of Peace* was commissioned from [Alice Parker](#) for this concert. Alice Parker's name is synonymous with choral music in America as composer, conductor and teacher. First gaining renown for the many arrangements written in collaboration with the late Robert Shaw, she has continued working independently, composing operas, cantatas, chamber works and hundreds of shorter choral pieces. In 1985, she founded Melodious Accord, Inc., an umbrella organization which includes a 16-voice professional chorus and which sponsors workshops and symposia for conductors, teachers and church musicians.

Ms. Parker has provided the following notes for Sing Now of Peace:

"*Sing Now of Peace* was commissioned by Alan Harler and the Mendelssohn Club for the gathering of several choruses at this anniversary celebration. The new work needed to be joyous, easily learned, minimally accompanied, and to express some unifying notion. Last Fall, when I was searching for an idea, Peace suggested itself as a universal good - now even more timely. A search through English poetry supplied the single lines for the round. And Native American spirituality, with its founding in the natural world, seemed an excellent source for amplifying songs about young women and men (a very atypical Warrior's Song), hospitality and dance. In each case, the music is based on the rhythm of the words, and the firm belief that singing together is one of the surest routes to international and intercultural understanding."

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**[Program Notes by Michael Moore](#)**