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News

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WILLIAM FERRIS CHORALE PREMIERES CONTEMPORARY SACRED WORKS BY AMERICAN COMPOSERS

*New CD Includes Music by Hovhaness,
Blackwood, Rochberg, Ferris, and Others*

Longtime champions of contemporary sacred music and American composers, the William Ferris Chorale, conducted by its music director, Paul French, continue that tradition with a new CD of world premiere recordings.

American Choral Premieres, a program of religious works by living and recent American composers, includes first-time recordings of works by Alan Hovhaness, Egon Cohen, Paul Nicholson, Paul French, Easley Blackwood, Robert Kreutz, William Ferris, William C. White, and George Rochberg (Cedille Records CDR 90000 109). This is the Chorale's third Cedille CD.

Hovhaness (1911–2000) turned to texts from the Hebrew Bible for his *Four Motets*, Op. 268, which draws on verses from the prophet Jeremiah and from three Psalms. Composed in 1973, “this straightforward foursome is characterized by its use of mostly-tonal harmonies and chordal structure, strikingly contrasted at times with fugal passes, and Hovhaness’s care in expressing the meaning of the words,” observes Andrea Lamoreaux of Chicago’s WFMT-FM in her notes for the CD booklet.

Cohen (b. 1984), a former student of Chicago composer Easley Blackwood, uses a translation of the Latin text for his exquisite, often dreamlike setting of the *Stabat Mater* (2006), which depicts a grieving Mary at the Crucifixion. Cohen frequently evokes grief by having some of the voice parts hum quietly, as the tenors and basses do at the beginning, or vocalize an extended “Ah” as several choir sections do a few measures into the piece. Cohen sometimes creates six-part textures, as on the phrase “Oh that loving mother’s plight,” where soprano and bass sections are divided; and again when the climax is reached at “Let the cross then be my guard.”

A composer who also serves as an accompanist for the William Ferris Chorale, Nicholson (b. 1963) uses the traditional Latin text for his *Velum templi* (1998), comprising material from Matthew and Luke. In the CD notes, Lamoreaux describes the piece as emphasizing “vertical harmonies, with no polyphonic movement; these harmonies are often chromatic and somewhat clashing, to represent the drama of the text in vivid fashion.”

French (b. 1959), who was appointed music director of the William Ferris Chorale in 2005, has composed more than 200 instrumental and vocal works. *Who Am I* is his 2007 setting of a posthumously published poem by the anti-Nazi German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned and executed for his active resistance to the Third Reich. The poem, which Bonhoeffer wrote during his imprisonment, contrasts the calm, smiling self-confidence others observed in him with his private anger and longing. The poem concludes, “Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.” French employs a “direct, at times declamatory, musical style” that puts the focus strongly on the words and their meaning, Lamoreaux writes.

During a distinguished career, Blackwood (b. 1933) has composed in a wide range of styles and idioms, including atonal and microtonal techniques. For *A King James Magnificat* (2004), Blackwood, an emeritus professor at the University of Chicago, “chose to adhere to the

tradition of tonal, triadic harmony, with touches of jubilant polyphonic inspiration” from Baroque masters, Lamoreaux writes. He casts each of the *Magnificat*’s ten verses in a different key. “The key changes are not sudden or obvious, but they serve the listener by subtly shifting the character of the music,” she writes.

The *Scapulis Suis* is part of the traditional Roman Catholic liturgy for the first Sunday of Lent. A noted composer of music for the Catholic Church, Kreutz (1922–1996) created a musical setting (1960) whose slow unfolding and largely mid-level dynamics allow the words to be heard and understood clearly.

Ferris (1937–2000), namesake and co-founder (with tenor John Vorrasi) of the William Ferris Chorale, devoted his professional life to the performance of sacred choral music. His *Lyrice Sacra* (1962), a group of three Latin motets drawn from the Old and New testaments, employs relatively simple settings for textual clarity. The character of the music changes from piece to piece to reflect the texts.

White (b. 1983), another former composition student of Blackwood’s at the University of Chicago, divides the choir for his *Nunc Dimittis* (2007) into six parts, with a split soprano section, instead of using the standard soprano, alto, tenor, bass configuration. “White’s setting is radically different from most,” Lamoreaux writes, in that he recounts the entire story in which the prophet Simeon encounters the infant Jesus and his mother, Mary, in the temple of Jerusalem. “The result is a miniature narrative cantata . . . a vivid scene involving both human drama and divine promise.”

New York City’s Jewish Theological Seminary commissioned Rochberg (1918–2005), one of the most prominent and admired American composers of the second half of the 20th century, to write *Behold My Servant*, which was premiered in 1973. It reflects the period during which Rochberg diverged from the serialism he had championed as a member the 1950s avant-

garde and began writing in more of a neo-Romantic style. The work is a dramatic, declamatory setting of texts from the Old Testament and the mystical poetry of William Blake (1757–1827). Through music of “singular strength and assertiveness,” Lamoreaux observes, “we hear a persistence of faith and affirmation that stretches across centuries and millennia.”

American Choral Premieres was funded in part through a grant from The Aaron Copland Fund for Music.

Since its founding in 1971, the William Ferris Chorale has given more than 160 world, American, and Chicago premieres of important new compositions. The mixed-voice choir has been acclaimed for its concerts of music by Dominick Argento, Samuel Barber, John Corigliano, Gian Carlo Menotti, Ned Rorem, William Walton, and many others, often with the composers as honored guests. The Chorale prides itself on a tradition of active collaboration among composers, conductor, and singers — a tradition that defines the Chorale and distinguishes it within the Chicago choral community.

Celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2009, Grammy award-winning Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing the most noteworthy classical artists in and from the Chicago area.

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American Choral Premieres
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 109)

- Alan Hovhaness: *Four Motets*, Op. 268 (11:54)
Egon Cohen: *Stabat Mater* (8:01)
Paul Nicholson: *Velum templi* (4:03)
Paul French: *Who Am I?* (5:37)
Easley Blackwood: *A King James Magnificat* (12:49)
Robert Kreutz: *Scapulis Suis* (2:07)
William Ferris: *Lyrice Sacra* (7:32)
William C. White: *Nunc Dimittis* (8:23)
George Rochberg: *Behold, My Servant* (8:06)

William Ferris Chorale
Paul French, conductor