


Fanfare Magazine Sept/Oct 2024

CD Review by [David DeBoor Canfield](#)

GARROP *Terra Nostra* • Stephen Alltop, cond; Michelle Areyzaga (sop); Leah Dexter (mez); Jesse Donner (ten); David Govertsen (bar); Alice Millar Chapel Ch; Northwestern University Ch & SO • ÇEDILLE 90000 227 (65:53 )

Ever since I became familiar with the music of Chicago-based Stacy Garrop a good decade ago, I've been a fan. She writes in a style that is at once profound and audience-friendly. The present disc contains but one work, her oratorio *Terra Nostra* (Our Earth). Garrop has long been concerned about environmental issues and mankind's care for the planet, and this large-scale work has sprung from that very concern. In it, she also seeks a restoration of a symbiotic relationship between humanity and the planet it inhabits.

A dramatic and dense *fortissimo* blast launches the work's part one ("Creation of the World") which celebrates Earth's birth and beauty. Garrop's text draws from many traditions, beginning with the Judeo-Christian one found in Genesis 1, and branches out from this well-known text to other creation stories from India, Indigenous North America, and Egypt. Other portions of this first section set poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Walt Whitman. The opening quasi-atonal sonority quickly yields to a tonal idiom redolent of certain of Garrop's forbears, drawing upon the rich choral tradition of America and England that has been established by composers such as Randall Thompson, Kenneth Leighton, and Frank La Rocca, among many others. A particularly gorgeous piece in the first section comes with "Smile O voluptuous cool-breathed earth!" The listener cannot help but be enchanted by the radiance of this piece, but also that produced by a children's chorus at periodic intervals in the oratorio.

A second section, "The Rise of Humanity," deals with the effect that mankind's technological advances and increasingly luxurious lifestyles have had upon the Earth. A tenor soloist is featured to introduce this section that opens with a setting of Tennyson's *Locksley Hall*. In subsequent pieces in this section, Garrop explores the impact of modern science and technology on our planet. I was particularly taken with the soaring *High Flight* (a setting of the poem by John Gillespie Magee, Jr., made famous by Ronald Reagan in his address to the nation after the loss of the space shuttle Columbia). The following piece, *Binsey Poplars* by Gerard Manley Hopkins, features a gorgeous duet by soprano and mezzo-soprano, mostly light and airy, but interlaced with ominous undertones. This section culminates with Garrop's setting of Shelley's *A Dirge*, a dark and ominous (through numerous timpani rolls) piece that obscures tonal centers to a large degree, as it builds up to several shattering climaxes.

Part three is entitled "Searching for balance" and employs three texts that continue depictions of the earth's catastrophic events from natural disasters (Lord Byron's *Darkness*) and manmade ones (Wordsworth's *The World is Too Much With Us*), of which Chernobyl immediately comes to my mind. The climax of the oratorio comes in Wendell Berry's *The Want of Peace*, a plea for human beings to live more simply. The oratorio closes poignantly with a reiteration of Whitman's *A Blade of Grass*, albeit expanded by another text in which that noted American poet writes, "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love."

Throughout her use of these thought-provoking texts, Garrop expertly captures and enhances the essence of each poem in her music, to provide the listener with an overwhelming aural and emotional experience. I say this even as someone who, although firmly convinced that the climate on our planet is changing, nevertheless questions whether such change is anthropogenic. The Earth's climate has been demonstrably both much warmer and much colder at many various points before people were able to affect it. Nevertheless, I firmly agree with her premise that we ought to be good stewards of the planet that we all dwell on. It is, after all, the only one we will have for the foreseeable future.

My hat is off to Stacy Garrop for her brilliant writing in this work. Soloists, chorus, and orchestra all do a good job in presenting the work in compelling fashion. I shall refrain from picking a few possible nits since it is unlikely we shall be offered a competing version any time soon. Highly recommended. **David DeBoor Canfield**

This article originally appeared in Issue 48:1 (Sept/Oct 2024) of *Fanfare Magazine*.