

“Our American Journey”--Chanticleer (2002)

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In 2002, the popular American professional male vocal ensemble Chanticleer issued its 26th recording, “Our American Journey,” which was nominated for a Grammy Award. This recording contains performances of 18 pieces, which reflect the ensemble’s history and the diverse repertory for which they are known.

Musicologist and tenor Louis Botto founded the group to perform the Renaissance sacred music he was studying as a musicologist. They made their debut in San Francisco’s historical Old Mission Dolores in May, 1978, singing music by Byrd, Isaac, DuFay, Ockeghem, Josquin, Morales and Morley. In 1991, Botto achieved his goal of having a totally professional ensemble that toured and made recordings. Today, the group performs in prestigious venues around the world. In 1983, Botto named Joseph Jennings his successor as Music Director. During his long tenure with Chanticleer, Jennings oversaw the production of 25 recordings, including the one discussed here.

“Our American Journey” represents the repertory performed by the group over time: chant, music by 17th-century Mexican composers, early American choral tradition (William Billings and selections from two important 19th-century music books—“The Missouri Harmony” [1827] and “Sacred Harp” [1844]), a group of significant contemporary American composers (Steven Stucky, Jackson Hill and William Hawley), plus arrangements of popular American music by Gene Puerling, Jack Halloran and Joseph Jennings. The presence of Jennings looms large--he had a direct hand in creating the music of half of the CD. The compilation is truly an “American journey,” a potent reminder that America is a diverse nation.

First is the familiar Protestant hymn “Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah,” sung to an anonymous Appalachian melody in Dorian mode. Anyone familiar with choral ensembles knows of the struggle to achieve unison in each of the parts. The unison achieved by 12 professional singers is flawless in its execution; never does one hear a rough edge in the group’s sound.

Next come two Mexican Baroque compositions, an area born of the group’s close collaboration with musicologist, Craig Russell. The first is “Credidi,” an eight-part, double-choir setting of the Latin text of Psalm 115 by Jaun de Llenas. Its antiphonal multi-choir style is often associated with the Basilica of San Marco in Venice where it was practiced by two of early Baroque’s greatest composers--Giovanni Gabrieli and Claudio Monteverdi. A setting of *versa est in luctum* (“My harp is tuned to mourning”), a text best known in settings by Tomas Luis da Victoria and

Alphonso Lobo, follows. Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla was born in Spain, but emigrated to Mexico early in his career, where he helped fashion a style that became popular among his contemporaries. The motet boasts extremely expressive harmonies that remind the author of the 17th-century German master, Heinrich Schütz.

Next come two works from the beginnings of American sacred composition and a contemporary work that takes that style as its inspiration. The first is "Jefferson," a hymn tune published in 1779 by John Newton in "The Missouri Harmony" (1827), one of many collections from this time that feature "shape note" tradition. The best indicator of a truly versatile choir is their ability to change their sound to fit the music they are singing. Here Chanticleer does just that--the rough-hewn harmony is matched by a sound and diction that recalls the untrained singers that first sang it. An even better example of this comes in the famous "David's Lamentation" by William Billings, the itinerant singing master who became the Father of American sacred music. Here, Chanticleer produces a sound that, while perfect in every respect, mimics the rural dialect of the people who sang this music. A notable aspect of Chanticleer's tuning at "O my Son" is a full-throated lamentation that is especially emotive due to Chanticleer's purity of intonation.

"Soar away!" by contemporary American composer A. M. Cagel, shows how one can revivify older music in the service of contemporary composition. This exuberant piece is a classic "fuguing tune," with imitative entries in all the voices.

Four compositions by prominent American composers are next. In "Whispers," Stephen Stucky sets a text by Walt Whitman ("Whispers of Heavenly Death") using two seemingly contradictory styles--modern harmonies that stretch the concept of tonality versus fragments of William Byrd's well-known motet, "Ave verum corpus." Stucky effects a seamless transition between the two styles, creating a dialogue between Whitman's gentle images of death told with an impressively astute vocabulary and Byrd's Latin text about Mary's grief over the suffering of her son. The second is "Voices of Autumn" by Jackson Hill, who won a Fulbright Scholarship to study Buddhist chant. This setting of a ninth-century Japanese poem contains an array of unmistakably Oriental musical devices--lack of harmonic motion, pentatonic scales, sustained notes and a type of ornamentation said to imitate that used in Japanese Court music. In "The Un-Covered Wagon," Brent Michael Davids, a member of the Mohican nation, displays his heritage in the whoops and chants we associate with the American Indian, vocal percussive effects and singers playing a wooden flute using air blown from the nostrils. The work's title contradicts the vision of America's westward expansion as portrayed in the 1923 epic Western silent film, "The Covered Wagon." Davids takes a radically different view of history, contradicting the migrant's sense of a wild expanse of space. "Fuggi, fuggi dolor" ("Flee, sorrow, flee") is one of three poems by Torquato Tasso that William Hawley set to fulfill a 2000 commission from Chanticleer. In a blend of Italian lyricism with luminous triadic harmony, Hawley emulates the madrigal composer's use of textual imagery and rhythm in this unmistakably contemporary rendering of Renaissance imagery.

The remainder of the CD consists of what one would call "light" fare, an extension of Chanticleer's repertory that may well have been in response to the popularity of the King's Singers. There are two arrangements of Stephen Foster song's--"I Dream of Jeanie" and "Camptown Races" and "Love Walked In" by George Gershwin--by master vocal arranger, Gene Puerling, who is known for his work with two famous vocal quartets--the Hi-Lo's and Singers and The Singers Unlimited. These are followed by four arrangements by long-time music

director, Joseph Jennings. These popular song arrangements round out “Our American Journey,” a CD of extraordinary vocal quality and excellent performances.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.