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Where medieval poetry meets the Tango

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Photo courtesy of Chicago A Cappella

Music Review

We all knew what to expect when Chicago A Cappella quietly slipped from the shadows to the stage in Pilgrim Congregational Church, April 14. For 14 years they have consistently produced great concerts throughout the Chicago area. But this evening, with founder Jonathan Miller conducting, "Through Argentine Eyes" took the audience beyond the ordinary on many levels.

For starters, bass Aaron Johnson of Oak Park was honored at this, his 102nd performance with the ensemble over the past nine years. Johnson is leaving the group in order to become, as he said, "one of the few people out there who specialize in disorders of the singing voice." He will begin doctoral work at UW-Madison in June.

Among the other standouts on hand was Ezequiel Viñao of New York, whose recent composition, "The Wanderer," was the cornerstone of the program. At a very well-attended and arresting pre-concert talk, Viñao spoke thoughtfully of his engagement with the medieval Anglo-Saxon poem that became the basis of the 30-minute work for 6-part unaccompanied chorus. The length in and of itself is audacious. Viñao translated the epic poem into modern English himself. The text, opulent with imagery, probes the psychological realm of a 10th-century warrior's inmost thoughts.

Viñao's teachers, Milton Babbitt and Olivier Messiaen, could not have been more distinct from one another. Their concepts of organizing sound ranged from Babbitt's intellectual and mathematical approach to a sumptuous spiritual expression in the case of Messiaen. Viñao's relentless language sounds a lot more like Messiaen than Babbitt.

As Viñao explained, "Real art demands that you go back to it to learn its secrets. Great art should make you re-evaluate things you take for granted. It's a catalyst to make you think." By that measure, "The Wanderer" hit the mark, with painfully anguishing chords and searing passages of cutting dissonance that reflect the mental and emotional downswings of the warrior. The music vividly captures the forlorn and forsaken, feelings that are as much a part of war as the destruction and violence that makes today's headlines. The leap to current events was easy; in fact, Viñao stressed how overcome he was by the immediacy of an ancient text from a dusty archive.

Chanticleer, the prestigious men's chorus from San Francisco, invited Chicago A Cappella to co-commission a work from Viñao in 2004 through Meet the Composer Commissioning Music/USA. Miller studied the work in a Chanticleer performance last fall and CAC had the luxury of working personally with Viñao in local rehearsals last month.

After such intense immersion in "The Wanderer," Miller said, "It is the hardest piece CAC has ever taken on. The tonal language is a combination of hypnotic and dissonant."

The difficulty pushed CAC far beyond its usual easy-listening harmonies. Paced in complicated speech and chant rhythms, the uncommon clusters of pitches were perhaps as much a challenge for the audience as the singers. Their intense effort was apparent and duly recognized by a very supportive crowd.

Equally exceptional on this program, though much shorter, was Osvaldo Golijov's "Coral del Arrecife" (Chorale of the Reef) from Oceana, setting a text by Pablo Neruda. At the moment, Golijov fills the prestigious Chicago Symphony Orchestra Mead Composer-in-Residence chair, and this lyrical composition for chorus is evidence that he deserves the post. "Coral" was a ripple of warm, sensuous sonorities beautifully brought to life by the ensemble, which seemed to transcend the notes and create an aura of magic.

Even further from the usual was Daniel Noce's flamboyant choreography. His three pas de deux in Latin idioms flawlessly matched the wordless tango numbers by Astor Piazzolla. Don't try these steps at home, or even in a couple's dance class. The tricky partnering offered by Noce and Ramona Nita was pure artistry-clean, voluptuous, and daring. Careful spotlighting played down the churchy environs and played up Noce's tuxedo and Nita's slinky black skirts. Her 3-inch spike heels made the slides and skips even more breathtaking. Noce's quick-step tap dance solo in the traditional Malambo of the gauchos was especially dazzling.

Who thought someone could add to CAC's usual fine singing? Playing in a league with Chanticleer, performing works by two of the most creative talents of this generation, and presenting star-quality dancers, all adds up to an extraordinary evening.

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