

The Star-Scape Singers' Sound Phenomenon

by Professor Leo Normet

The "Star-Scape" is the opposite of the "landscape," an ever-exciting image recalling the drawing "Man and Night" by Kustjan Raud. For two nights under the vaults of St. Nicholas Church, we were under the spell of The Star-Scape Singers' thrilling performance.

The heart and soul of the Toronto ten-voice ensemble, made up of five female and five male singers, is Kenneth G. Mills. After the first concert appearance he told me that his career as a professional pianist had started in 1952. After admiring the entirely unique sound of The Star-Scape Singers, I could not help admitting that I had not thought of the Maestro's pianistic ability. During the second performance, however, I achieved more enlightenment. The pianist's subconscious refinement of sound colour had been carried out by superb flexibility of voices, by harmonies with their long-sustained ebbs and tides, and by changes of timbre colours. It became evident that it fitted in with his artistic aims.

There is still something to add. Kenneth Mills, having published three collections of verses, in his capacity of ensemble leader had simultaneously effected not only the dream of a pianist but also that of a poet, obtaining the utmost blend of music and words. As Verlaine put it: "De la musique encore et toujours." The extensive repertoire of this singing group is based upon the lyrics of Kenneth G. Mills. Set to music, the text has acquired even more power.

So there is also Kenneth Mills the composer. He knows exactly the nature of the music to be written. Thanks to the ensemble's infinite commitment to music and remarkable technical ability of singing, their apparently effortless flexibility and the incredible vocal range from the lowest bass tones to the Miliza-Korjus-like highest ones, the collection of recipes produced by Kenneth Mills' kitchen of miracles may be perpetually complimented! Extensive range, peculiar to the voice of each separate singer, is a notable asset for timbre transitions. The voices blend absolutely and, if necessary, attain an instrumental, organ-like sound. The above asset determines also the nature of their music matching the stature of music to be written for the group: conventional choral songs provide them no opportunity to display the possibilities of their art.

In addition to Kenneth Mills, the New York-born baritone Christopher Dedrick has likewise contributed significantly to the repertoire of the ensemble. Trained in New York, he moved to Toronto and intensified his study of choral composition and vocal training with Kenneth Mills. As a result of this prolific collaboration, fifteen records have been released featuring around one hundred songs. Another recording

was added to their present collection with the one-and-one-half-hour *The Fire Mass*, the most extended item presented by The Star-Scape Singers and recorded at St. Nicholas' in Tallinn. Dedicated to his mentor, the latter adapted it for use by the ensemble.

Christopher Dedrick's production credits have been associated with chamber music and background music for films and television. As a singer, Christopher Dedrick is carving his part as painstakingly as any other Star-Scape Singer, whereas Kenneth Mills himself is in charge of the whole venture. I employed the word "carve" not only for the sake of adornment but for the simple reason that I could not find a more suitable word to describe the plasticity of even the shortest line or exclamation in their performance. In choral singing, plasticity gives shape to ideas. So a theatre without actors is born.

The idiom of these choral compositions, predominantly diatonic, has no direct relationship with the leading note and tonic system. The opportunities of the emancipated tonic are practically unlimited. And one of these opportunities has also been evolved by Arvo Part in his *tintinnabuli*-style mood music. The range of the introverted melody is rather modest, motivic repetitions expressing inner peace (fairly abundant): one of the voices rests upon repetitions of the minor triad. American minimalists like Steve Reich have an inclination for applying diatonics and various devices of repetition.

Mills'-Dedrick's Neo-Romantic close-to-nature lyrical, expressive songs, searching for divine and human essence, offer — instead of repetitions — a great deal of sound discoveries taking us by surprise. The play of timbres by solo voices alternates with the unexpected appearance of chords, based mostly on thirds warranting rich sonority. There is not much wallowing in melodies, rather the expressive recitative is preferred, wrapped in rainbow colour-plays. The same applies to the extensive composition of an earlier period, *St. Christopher*, included in the program of The Star-Scape Singers' first European tour in 1983, as well as *The Fire Mass* (1986). (All in all they have already appeared for twelve years.) The latter is a large-scale work, a setting of both traditional Latin texts and English verses by Kenneth Mills.

Employing two languages in the same composition, the creators of *The Fire Mass* followed a pattern similar to that found in Britten's *War Requiem* and Bernstein's *Mass*. This pattern leads to dramatic actions. But contrary to the works of Britten and Bernstein, *The Fire Mass* is unaccompanied by instruments. As a cappella masses were written already in the late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, adherence to consistency is there fairly evident. In *The Fire Mass* even Gregorian chants are haunting. Furthermore, it contains even more far-reaching grasps in time and space. For example, in some episodes there are glimmers of Tantric liturgical chants practised in Tibetan monasteries (usually lying on one's back on the floor), a device of employing

extremely low, long-sustained bass-tones together with simultaneous octave plus a third higher sounding overtones: accented *sforzato*, similar to roaring outbursts of sound frequent in Maori male singing, something unique, characteristic of Canadian Indians. Marshall McLuhan, a compatriot of The Star-Scape Singers, has somewhere noted that today's world may be compared to a village: whatever happens in one end is immediately known in the other as well. The same comparison may also be applicable to music. Thus, no reason to wonder that such a host of syntheses is originating.

So the most significant feature peculiar to the art of The Star-Scape Singers is favouring sonoristics — the play of sovereignty requiring timbres and sound harmonies. Although Estonian choral sonoristic elements date already from the choral writing of Konstantin Turnpu — from the period of time indicating the end of Debussy's life, up to The Star-Scape Singers' concert appearance in Tallinn we had never before witnessed such highly polished choral sonoristics. Instrumental sonoristics does not strike us any more as a novel experience since we have heard the early compositions by Penderecki and, not long ago, the brilliant performance of Kroumata, a most skillful percussion group from Sweden.

Nowadays, contrary to the custom of previous centuries, nobody aims at obtaining a balance of all means of expression. One medium, however, may predominate according to the principle of *pars pro toto* or even manifest individually (e.g., percussion) either in one single entity or in an ensemble able to create (The Star-Scape Singers). So timbre occupied a dominating position in Bartok's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste* (1936), rhythm in his *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (1937). To be sure, the ingenious alteration of sound novelties is not a phenomenon previously heard or seen — hence not *deja vu* but rather something previously read — in other words, *deja lu*, in the verses of the Spanish Baroque poet de Gongora or of the French symbolist Mallarme. The synthesis of late Romanticism and uniquely original choral sonoristics make the renderings of The Star-Scape Singers the present day music.

Perhaps we will have the pleasure of hearing them anew in Tallinn during the days of our Choral Festival. The Star-Scape Singers have drawn standing ovations on this and on the other side of the Atlantic. Just as it happened at St. Nicholas.

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