

"Twentieth Century Renaissance in Choral Sound"

Comments by Brian Jackson
Internationally-known choral and orchestral conductor

In trying to describe the music of Kenneth Mills and The Star-Scape Singers, "revolutionary" is one word that comes to mind—totally a new concept in classical terms. With The Star-Scape Singers I couldn't say it's "like" anything. You could say the sopranos are like Cleo Laine, but the actual music, the style, defies description. It's on a level of its own. Fortunately that's good for the audience, because then they don't compare it to anything.

I think this new music seems to have so much audience appeal because the text is allowed to come through the music. This is important. There's a tremendous unity. It's dangerous to compare music, but, for example, what Stephen Sondheim is to Broadway today, in that he is a total unity unto himself, that is exactly what this music is, because it's conceived as a whole artistic endeavour, as was Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. I think actually *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a good word to sum it up. It means a "whole art work." And I think that's what appeals to people, because the communication from The Star-Scape Singers is one of total honesty.

Now some of the audiences who are exposed to it may not agree with certain parts of it. Some people are very nervous. You know, they hear "the Universe" and they say, "Ah, Humanism is creeping in here; I don't believe in this," or "That's uncomfortable," the usual kind of silly criticism. But listening as a musician I don't have to be a Christian to decide that the *Missa Solemnis* of Beethoven or the Bach *B-Minor Mass* are probably the greatest music creations of all time. If you're an atheist you would have to forget to listen to the words. I'm not a lyricist, but as a choral person, I'm absolutely staggered with the actual Star-Scape tone, the sound. With this music you don't have to rationalize it or organize it. There's a very direct connection. It doesn't need analyzing. I did at one point compare this style of singing to that of the bel canto. In the day of amplification that we have today, everyone relies so much on singing very softly and relaxed so that they can go a whole evening of concert; pop groups rely very heavily on machinery, whereas in the old days in the opera houses there was no amplification. The voices had to be big. And this bigness, this built-in resonance in the voices of The Star-Scape Singers, which doesn't need any amplification whatsoever, must point to some connection between the two techniques. Those high notes . . . incredible! It's a technique that I'm sure many a singing teacher would love to study.

It's really disgraceful that these singers are not heard more in Canada. But, you know, that's the trouble with a lot of Canadian talent. It's known outside, but not in the country. I just think Star-Scape is so unique. We can produce a choir—we do have the Festival Singers and the Mendelssohn Choir in Toronto is considered among the world's great choruses, the world over. It was invited to sing in Europe this last summer. But the Mendelssohn is not a very convenient travelling package, and there isn't the devotion that there is to this whole entity. Again, it's a matter of comparing it

to someone like Wagner, who was so totally committed to the idea of the art work creation that there would be nothing else that he would do. He wouldn't conduct anyone else's music; he was entirely concerned with his own music and the performance of it. I have said that The Star-Scape Singers should be travelling the world as a great export, because I think that everyone should hear it. And I think the government should be brought into play to support the group as a Canadian group to travel.

The harmonic content of Mr. Mills' music obviously utilizes all that has gone before in music—and he has gone a step further in that he can use the voices as instruments with such pure intonation. For example, dominant sevenths are normally as far as most church choirs can stretch dissonance. Star-Scape can go to minor nineteenthths! The effect of the overtones that are built up cannot really be measured in decibels on an oscillator. These over-tones have never been created even by an orchestra. The Greek music, the theories of Pythagoras, come to mind, where they had voices singing in fifths and octaves in those theatres. Perhaps that is where it all goes back to. Large choirs can be very boring to listen to; always the same sound. That's why when we go to Baroque music, it's sensible to go back to small forces; very pure.

I particularly like the fact that I don't hear bar lines when I hear Star-Scape perform. You know, someone described the bar as "the box the music is packed in and to really appreciate you have to take it out of the box." I said to a choir last night, "You know, you've boxed music in these ruddy bars for most of your life. Just erase them and sing together with my help," and it was amazing. There was a total concept of line. That's what the Singers have, that wonderful linear sense. The fact that there isn't a beat amazes me. It's never tedious. These days young people are fed "beats" in restaurants, in discos, in bars, and even in airports, and expect the same at concerts. Mr. Mills' music has the occasional percussion effect, but this is not used as a rhythmic device. He is relying on the heartbeat that the Singers convey to the beholders.

The pieces of The Star-Scape Singers would never be able to be performed by other vocal groups, and that's probably why I admire this choir so much. The perfection is such that it can only be performed by the most expert artists. Because Mr. Mills' music is of a revolutionary type, it would require a new school of conducting, which is really total commitment to the creative energy of the score. This music is on such a high level of composition, it's very complex. It's like Messaien. It's that kind of work that only the greatest orchestras can play or the very finest choirs can sing. There's nothing wrong with that. It means that the Singers have to do the travelling and the communication of their own music. I would love to get hold of one piece and hand it to my own choir, but technically they don't have it. The sopranos could get to high C and that's it, and the basses might get down to G and after that they would just rumble!

Having been associated with Eugene Ormandy, I know that he would react very favourably to The Star-Scape Singers, because he is always seeking perfection in the orchestra and from the singers in the choir. He refers to his choir as the best chorus in North America. Unfortunately it only meets three times a year. And it is a staggering

instrument, but again it's a blanket sound, it doesn't have any overtones. At times it has a high decibel range, but if the Star-Scape music were given to them it would be very blah. Star-Scape and the music of Mr. Mills is like Stravinsky. It's designed for a chamber group of very highly-qualified and trained musicians. And it's written for that group in the way that much of the chamber music of Stravinsky was written for specific people. I think it's important to write for a specific person. Wagner composed *Brunhilde* for a certain lady. It's very difficult to think of the *Serenade* by Britten without thinking of Peter Pears singing the opening phrase, without Dennis Brain playing the horn. And it's been proved that no one has really played the horn solo the way Brain does on the recording.

As for Mr. Mills' conducting, he shows much more than what a normal conductor can show. In his hands, it's more like a total recreation of what he composed.

I feel that Star-Scape has the most perfect intonation anywhere in North America, if not Europe as well. When they performed with my orchestra, I gave the orchestra very little warning about what was to be expected. I just said, "This choir cannot perform with you because you will be found out of tune." I said, "Perhaps you will understand when you hear their intonation, which will make you want to just put your instruments away and not play for the rest of the concert," which is exactly what some of them said. They sat there and their mouths were wide open, and some of them closed their eyes so they could listen much more intently to the sound, but wasn't a repeated programme. I thought the orchestra played better on the third performance. We repeated our works, of course. But I really think they were affected by the genuineness of the Singers around them. I felt they played much better in tune. When I told them that one of the Star-Scape rehearsals could go on for eight hours non-stop, without a break, and where there was such devotion that you weren't paid necessarily by the hour, they just shook their heads in disbelief. They couldn't understand such devotion to an Ideal.

This singing is a state of body and mind and not just a vocal technique. There has to be a technique, but here I think it's an opening up of the person in such a way that he can give of himself without this sort of frigidity that often occurs with singers. Most people don't use half of what they have; most singers are not themselves. I think what Mr. Mills does is enable the person to be at one with himself. Thus his singing becomes an extension of his own well-being, his oneness. You know, we have a larynx of about two inches, but we only use one third of it. Now how do you get people to use that? I do not know. I think they have to be reborn again in some kind of way. Yes, it's a rebirth—a renaissance, but of the Soul rather than of a renaissance applied to art. I think that would be a great description of the sound, you know. It's a renaissance in choral sound, a twentieth century renaissance in choral sound.

Brian Jackson, February 1981