

Reshaped-note Singing

By Kyle Gann

William Duckworth

William Duckworth's work is so smooth, so simple, that to tag it "new music" doesn't do justice to its immediate appeal. He's best known for his 24-piece piano cycle *The Time Curve Preludes*, a meditative if sometimes dissonant exploration of accelerating number-forms using the "Dies irae" chant and Satie quotations. If you're a fan of the Lovely Music recording of that work, you're sure to enjoy the February 20 premiere of Duckworth's *Southern Harmony* at Merkin Hall. The 70-minute choral cycle will be performed by the Gregg Smith Singers, for decades the leading interpreters of American choral music, assisted by Bucknell University's Rooke Chapel Choir (William Payn, director). It looks to be the biggest choral premiere by a Downtown composer since Philip Glass's *Another Look at Harmony* in 1977—also sung by Gregg Smith's group.

Southern Harmony is a post-minimalist reworking of hymns from the famous 1854 edition of the eponymous hymn collection, one of the staple sources for shaped-note singing. Shaped-notes were an early-19th century outgrowth of a Protestant hymn tradition, printed with square, round, triangular, and diamond-shaped noteheads to help congregations learn the tunes. The tradition migrated to Appalachia with the first mid-European settlers

and, untouched by outside civilization, has kept alive an antique European style—raucous, unsentimental, and fervently devotional—in the rural South. Duckworth grew up in North Carolina, but not singing the music.

"When I first heard shaped-note singing, I didn't think I knew anything about it," Duckworth says in his Weehawken apartment (he divides his time between here and Bucknell University in Pennsylvania). "In grad school at the University of Illinois, Neely Bruce had a group that sang shaped-note hymns. I loved them, and it slowly dawned on me that I had grown up with this sound. Until I was five or six years old, my family went to a rural Methodist church where they did shaped-note singing. My grandfather was one of the leaders, a big, bullfrog bass. Then we moved to Morganton, a bigger town. There was a church a block or two away from my high school. There was no air conditioning, so all the windows were up, and they sung shaped-note hymns. But I had never sung it myself until the big revival in the '60s."

Duckworth wrote *Southern Harmony* on sabbatical in Syracuse in 1980-81; Bruce had commissioned a 15-minute piece, and, with Duckworth's usual aptitude for stretching simple material to great lengths, the piece wound up lasting 70. "Every day, before I started writing, I would put myself in the right frame of mind by singing through *Southern Harmony* for at least an hour, the sopra-

no, then the alto, tenor, bass. In the course of the year, I sang through the book several hundred times."

All 20 songs of Duckworth's *Southern Harmony* have been performed in some version or another (one of them by 240 high school students), but until this Thursday they've never been heard all together. What do they sound like? On the surface they share the qualities of their models, glowing, consonant, modal, stately. You have to look inside the music for its genealogy, for beneath the unrippled surface lie phasing processes drawn from early minimalism. Duckworth's sketches (maintained with fanatical orderliness) reveal that many of the songs began by putting the melody through a phasing process similar to that of Steve Reich's *Piano Phase*.

"Consolation"—the first hymn and Duckworth's favorite—is phased against itself through 7/4 meter. "Holy Manna," with a major/minor split personality, puts phrases of the hymn through a pauseless process of loops whose length keeps changing, so that the rhythmic placement of any phrase is unpredictable. "Solemn Thought" divides each phrase of text between different voices, at rhythms determined by the Fibonacci series (1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13...), a major rhythmic device of *The Time Curve Prelude*. "Rock of Ages" is abstracted into stony lines of repeated notes on "la." "The Turtle Dove" intersperses chords within the original hymn



SILVIA OTTE

Duckworth: stretching simple material to great lengths

in Fibonacci-derived patterns. "Wondrous Love" exists in three versions in the original hymnal, and Duckworth fuses all three. "The Mouldering Vine" turns its melody into drone notes beneath repeating phrases, a favorite *Time Curve* technique. Structurally, "Distress" is the weirdest of all, written in a collage technique that combines chords from the other songs.

Just as you don't notice the number series that shape *Time Curve Preludes*'s graceful arcs, you'd never hear these devices if I didn't point them out. *Southern Harmony* doesn't sound at all "constructed." Many of the songs are sung entirely on solfège syllables like "la" and "fa." The process is an abstraction, but not at the expense of melody or momentum; "I wanted most of all," Duckworth says, "to maintain the integrity of the hymns." Rather, it's a translation from a naive (if complex) church tradition into a

form-and-texture-conscious concert medium, an exploration of processes inherent in the original hymns but not developed there.

"Every piece contains something from the original hymn. Sometimes it's just the words, sometimes it's the melody, but the melody gets buried somewhere. Sometimes it's just a rhythm or a chord. These songs aren't as clean as the *Preludes*. What I thought I was doing was exploring form beyond the *Preludes*. The *Preludes* were tidy; in *Southern Harmony* I threw different things together. I was looking for further forms to use, and I did, but they weren't forms I then followed up in other places. *Southern Harmony* brought a phase of my composing to an end."

The Gregg Smith Singers and the Rooke Chapel Choir will perform Southern Harmony February 20 at Merkin Hall, 129 West 67th Street, 362-8719. ■

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