In dreams

Concert takes audience through dream state across the centuries

By Benjamin Dunham
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NEW BEDFORD - The new music director of the Sine Nomine Choral Ensemble, Daniel P. Ryan, has been the conductor of the Boston Conservatory Conductor's Choir, so one could say without exaggeration that he's a "conductor's conductor." In the program presented Friday evening, Jan. 15, at Grace Episcopal Church in New Bedford, "In Your Wildest Dreams," Ryan led Sine Nomine Choral through a selection of choral masterpieces and modern works that fully demonstrated the impressive abilities of the group, whose members include Marion's own Vi Taylor and other vocalists from Falmouth, Dartmouth, Westport and points west.

Among the modern works were two by composition superstar Eric Whitacre, Whitacre's "October," with its "passages of scalar excitement and scintillating harmonies," was an important part of last fall's Tri-County Symphonic Band concert. In this concert, his "Sleep" established an appropriate hypnotic trance. Originally based on the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost, it was recast with new poetry about copyright problems. Its crunchy harmonies built in intensity, drifted off, and then vanished in a final iteration of the word "sleep." Later in the program, Whitacre's "Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine," a big, adventurous work, took us deep into the imagination of genius. Full of expressionistic writing, its episodes of consonance and dissonance dramatized the imagery of Charles Anthony Silvester's text. This piece disappeared at the end into whispers of wind. That set up the world premiere of "Dust" by Kevin Joest, the winner of Sine Nomine's composition contest last fall. Inspired by the Phil Hallenes video "Dust That Sings," Joest's work is characterized by rich, polyphonic writing and downward-sliding harmonies, ending with a quiet, chorially set "somnia" (meaning "dreams"). It was beautifully performed.

Other contemporary works included Dan Forrest's "A Basque Lullaby," whose arching lines were perhaps more yearning than comforting, György Orbán's "Daemon Irreptit Callidus," a devilishly "orchestral" setting that revealed hidden desires in fateful changes of mood, and Jester Bustos's "Ave Maria Stella," a more traditional homophonic setting of the vespers hymn to Mary, featuring a strong, heartfelt solo by soprano Heidi Dion.

Works from the Renaissance, early Baroque, and the 19th-century filled out the dream sequence with greater and lesser aptness. A 16-part "Dei Gratia," commonly attributed to the 15th-century giant Johannes Ockeghem, separated women's and men's voices along either side of the church, isolating them with perhaps too much specificity depending on where one sat in the nave. Orlando di Lasso's short "O la, o che bon echol," a work from the 16th century, grouped two SATB choruses front and back, achieving the desired antiphonal effect. From the 17th century, Heinrich Schütz's contemplative six-part "Seelig sind die Toten" was consistent in mood with its surroundings. From the 19th century, Joseph Rheinberger's poetic "Abenddöng" and Peter Cornelius's strophic "Der Traum" also fitted nicely into the flow.

On the other hand, Juan del Encina's "Cucu Cucu," with its tale of cuckoldry, seemed out of place, unless it was meant to represent a particular kind of marital nightmare. Its last line, translated "If your wife goes out to the bathroom, go out with her," seemed more a wry commentary on the Oscar Pistorius trial in South Africa than a portrayal of nocturnal imagination.

The audience was brought out of its reveries with William Byrd's "Awake Mine Eyes." A reference to "warbling thaws" may have reminded older listeners of the 7 a.m. bird calls that began Robert J. Lurtsma's morning show on WGBH-FM. Clement Janequin's "Le Chant desoiseaux" continued the aivan theme and sent everyone home happy remembering its clever imitations of the blackbird and nightingale and other syllabic sound-effects borrowed from our feathered friends.

On May 13, at the Unitarian Universalist Society in Fairhaven, Sine Nomine will present Orazio Vecchi's "L'Amor parrasico," a Renaissance madrigal comedy complete with costumed commedia dell'arte actors. If the performance is anything like the one I attended in New York in the 1980s with The Western Wind vocal sextet and three-quarter-size hand puppets, it will be a musical and visual treat. You won't want to miss it.

Benjamin Dunham was the founding executive director of Chamber Music America and the executive vice-president of the U.S. National Music Council. He has written reviews for the Washington Post, Musical America magazine, and a number of other publications. He is a regular contributor to The Sentinel.