



A Chat With Essential Voices USA Conductor Judith Clurman

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Judith Clurman
photo by Frank Wang

Judith Clurman, conductor of Essential Voices USA, talks about the group and their new CD "Celebrating the American Spirit."

Tell us about Essential Voices USA

My vocal ensemble, ranging from four to eighty singers, has a flexible roster of professionals and auditioned volunteers who perform a wide range of musical genres and styles. Select high school students participate in special programs. The singers and soloists are cast according to the repertoire and the group size varies according to the musical needs of each project.

What compelled you to put this CD Celebrating the American Spirit project together?

Since 9/11 I have been inspired to make a recording of Americana. In 2004, I commissioned and premiered the presidential pieces for a concert at the Library of Congress. Then in 2011, EVUSA recorded Sing Out, Mr. President for a residency on National Public Radio. I added other music about the presidency and other works and artists with whom I love to work.

What was it like to work with all these composers?

I asked composers whom I know from both the classical and musical theater worlds to participate. The original project, Sing Out, Mr. President, called for a one-minute piece, based on words of a president. The cycle evolved; pieces were dropped and new works were written. The other composers represented on the CD, Jennifer Higdon, Laurie Hochman, Larry Hochman, David Ludwig, Stephen Paulus, and Marc Shaiman, are all friends and colleagues.

What songs are on the CD?

The CD includes individual new and newly arranged works by composers and writers such as Irving Berlin (It Gets Lonely In the White House & God Bless America), Leonard Bernstein (Take Care of This House), Sheldon Harnick (Reason to Be Thankful), Jennifer Higdon (A Quiet Moment), Larry Hochman (Two Paraphrases on American Anthems & American Dream) and Laurie Hochman (The Pledge of Allegiance & American Dream), David Ludwig (The New Colossus), Stephen Paulus (Hymn for America), Marc Shaiman (A Seed of Grain: Theme from The American President), and John Philip Sousa (Stars and Stripe Forever).

What was the process like to create this?

Choosing repertoire for a CD is different than programming a concert. They each present challenges. I picture compiling pieces for a CD an old fashioned way. I still think about people listening together in a living room. The music has to tell a story, and get people excited to listen to the next piece on the recording. I must love both the text and the music to even consider putting a piece in the mix. For this project, I loved researching repertoire and studying the manuscripts and the score of Berlin's Mr. President, at the Library of Congress. In addition, some of the other works were arranged and orchestrated just for the CD. David Ludwig's The New Colossus was written for me when I conducted in a music festival in Virginia, back in 2002. What excited me most was hearing an Americana melody that Larry Hochman had written for television. I loved it and suggested that he get some words and Sheldon Harnick graciously agreed to write the text for the music and it became the song Reason to be Thankful.

Why did you choose these soloists KELLI O'HARA and RON RAINES ?

Because I believe that they are two of the finest singers around. I heard Kelli sing God Bless America for a World Series Yankee Game and for a few national television broadcasts from Washington DC. In addition, I knew that she also would be terrific on the Bernstein piece. Ron and I go back to being students together in the Vocal Chamber Music program at the Aspen Music festival. I always loved his work and knew that the two works he sings on the CD would be perfect for him. Luckily he agreed, and I am so excited to have him on it.

What are your future plans with ESSENTIAL VOICES USA?

EVUSA produces its own classical concerts, workshops, and recordings at the DiMenna Center for Classical Music and other well-known NYC venues. EVUSA will also continue to record traditional works from the classical repertoire. But, it is clear based on the eclectic mix on this CD, that I value all genres of music. EVUSA is currently in residence with New York Pops at Carnegie Hall's subscription series. We are even working on a Chanukah CD for release during holiday time in 2013. It will include some serious and popular music!

Was there a defining moment or breakthrough when you decided that music would be your life?

Yes. It was a magical. I was very young. I heard the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood, play Beethoven and Debussy. I knew, at that moment, that I would become a musician.

What is one of the most memorable performances you've experienced, either as a musician or a concertgoer?

Oh, I love too many things to answer that. Perhaps it was the feeling I felt while conducting the public sing along of the Mozart Requiem with the Juilliard Orchestra and Choral Union in Carnegie Hall, to commemorate the Fifth anniversary of 9/11. I felt the true power of community and choral music.

What are you listening to right now?

Thomas Tallis' Spem in Alium, Ella Fitzgerald's Swinging Christmas, string quartets by Aaron Kernis, the Pearl Fishers duet with Jussi Björling and Robert Merrill, and the Marvin Hamlisch's score to Sophie's Choice. Many composers have sent me scores so I am catching up and spending time listening to their new works. The pile has operas, chamber music, and choral music.

Can you describe the process you go through when preparing for a performance?

Since I primarily conduct vocal music, I always study the text first. Then I mark the score. I put in some phrase markings and make sure I know how I want the text pronounced. If a piece has previously been recorded, I often listen once on a CD or on my iPod. I learn a piece by looking at it and hearing it in my head. If I cannot figure something out, I often play a passage on the piano. I study in a quiet room or even take the score out of my backpack while riding on a bus or subway! I cut off all the other sounds around me and concentrate. I also have to think about how to rehearse it and teach it! By the way, I also research the historical background of the piece I am preparing.

If you were going to be secluded on a desert island with a few recordings for the rest of your life, what would be your top three choices?

Oh, this is so difficult. I suppose I will give you a gut reaction to this question- boxed sets of pieces: Bach's b minor mass or his Brandenburg Concerti, a Mozart opera TBD, and probably the Beethoven or Brahms Symphonies.

Three things you can't live without:

My husband Bruce, my son Ari, and my music.

If I wasn't a conductor, I would be...

I know that I would be a different type of conductor. I would concentrate on opera and some fine Broadway shows. I served as Associate Music Director for a TV show for one season (Sesame Street) and would work on a TV show in a heartbeat because I loved using all my musical and administrative skills.)