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JUDITH CLURMAN TALKS PRESIDENTS, COMPOSERS, & BIG BIRD

With the release of her latest choral album, *CELEBRATING THE AMERICAN SPIRIT*, Judith Clurman proves why she is the premiere choral conductor in New York City. I sat down with Judith to discuss the album, a superb tribute to United States presidents by her appropriately named ensemble; *ESSENTIAL VOICES USA*.

by David Davila (playwright / song-writer)

With presidential fever running rampant across America, Judith Clurman could not have picked a better time to release her latest choral album with Essential Voices USA. ***CELEBRATING THE AMERICAN SPIRIT (Sono Luminus DSL-92162)*** is a collection of classic and newly commissioned works celebrating America.

The centerpiece of the album, *SING OUT MR. PRESIDENT*, is a cycle that is based on quotes by sixteen of our presidents, from Washington to Obama, set to music by **some of America's most important composers** like Milton Babbitt, Robert Beaser, Jason Robert Brown, Jake Heggie, Andrew Lipka, Nico Muhly, Georgia Stitt, and Zazhary Wadsworth, among others.

The recording is illuminated by the gorgeous voices of Broadway stars Kelli O'Hara and Ron Raines, who join the chorus in works by Leonard Bernstein, Irving Berlin, and Larry Hochman.

Other composers featured include Pulitzer Prize winner Jennifer Higdon, David Ludwig, Stephen Paulus, Marc Shaiman, and the father-daughter team of Laurie and Larry Hochman. An added bonus is a new setting of lyrics, written for the recording, by Broadway lyricist Sheldon Harnick, to music by Tony award winning orchestrator Larry Hochman.



Judith took time to sit down with me during Hurricane Sandy to discuss this stellar album, the future of choral music, and of course - Big Bird.

Here's what she had to say:

David Davila: How did this album come about?

Judith Clurman: I had wanted to create an Americana album since I visited a firehouse right after 9/11, conducted *America the Beautiful* and cried with firemen. Then, in October 2004, I assembled a concert to celebrate the American Presidency at the Library of Congress. I asked twelve composers to write short works based on words of different presidents. Over the years, a few of the original works were replaced and the music was expanded to include texts from our most current presidents – Reagan, Clinton, Bush, and Obama. I subsequently performed these works in programs with professional choruses and high school workshops throughout the country. Years passed, and in February 2011, I was fortunate to serve as Artist-in-Residence for National Public Radio when my Essential Voices USA recorded a daily broadcast of each of these pieces. We used some of these recordings for the CD and added other repertoire to round out a commercial recording for Sono Luminus, finished in July of 2012. My professional ensemble of EVUSA singers remains the basis for the CD, but various ensemble configurations recorded *Sing Out, Mr. President* based on the requirements of the setting, ranging from a duet to fourteen select professionals, from eight young vocal fellows to a combination of professional, high school students and volunteer singers.

DD: Was there a process to how the composers, and the texts were chosen for this project?

JC: Of course. Choosing music takes months, years, and I spent a lot of time thinking about this. First, I must love the text and then I look at the music. Then I need to think about the listener.

Let me speak about *SING OUT MR. PRESIDENT* first. I wanted all types and ages of composers represented - musical theater, classical, young and old, known and unknown. The texts chosen were those spoken by a president while in office and every composer I asked came on board for the project. The other music I chose were pieces that were written for me, those that I had performed, or newly written works for the project. I researched some of this material at the Library of Congress, consulted with some experts, and fit all the pieces of the puzzle together.

DD: How did Kelli O'Hara and Ron Raines come aboard?

JC: I love *Take Care of This House* and *God Bless America*. Kelli is a perfect match for these songs. I asked her and she agreed. Ron is an old buddy of mine from the Aspen Music Festival School. I have always admired his work, so I asked him and he too agreed to get involved in the project.



DD: What is it like to produce a choral album in this day and age vs. twenty years ago?

JC: You ask about twenty years ago. Well, my first CD was recorded by New World Records in 1997. Subsequently, I made two more CDs of American repertoire for that company with my professional chorus, The New York Concert Singers. (My New World CDs: *Divine Grandeur*, *The Mask* and *A Season's Promise*) They were and still are a wonderful company. It was hard to raise money for a choral CD then and it's perhaps even more difficult today, especially in this age of you-tube and free downloads. I am grateful to my producer David Frost, advisor Marina Ledin, and Dan Shores at Sono Luminus for believing in my work and manufacturing *Celebrating the American Spirit*.

DD: Do you have any advice for choral composers who want to get their music performed or recorded?

JC: Never give up! I always look at scores! When I listen to a choral work that I like, I immediately ask the composer for a recording of other examples of their music. I want to know what makes them click. I believe that composers will have to start chipping in and helping performers raise the funds to record their music. They cannot sit back and expect the world to take care of them. Remember that it was not always easy for Beethoven or Mozart. They had to find folk to commission their music!

DD: You have become famous for being a champion of new choral composers, what changes do you see on the horizon for choral music as the century progresses?

JC: First I would like to say that I rarely think of a composer as a choral composer, but, rather, a composer who understands the voice and how to set a text. Sometimes I hear an instrumental work by someone and tell them to try to write for singers. And sometimes I hear a choral work and tell a student to major in instrumental writing because they have no idea how to set a text. These are two different animals. It is rare to find another Bach, Mozart, and/or Stravinsky who can comfortably write both! Vocal-and that means both song and choral - composers need to love the words they are working with or the music they write will not sound genuine.

I have been fortunate to sit on the ASCAP Awards Panel for Classical composers, so I have always followed the trends and familiarized myself with the work of hundreds of young composers. What I see is that we need to get composition teachers interested in having their students write vocal music and have young composers sing in choruses at the undergraduate level so they know what they are doing when they write!! Composers should study poetry and lyric writing. Honestly, I have not seen as many composers writing choral music as I see them interested in other genres. You cannot suddenly wake up and say, "Hey I want to write an opera or oratorio." You need to learn how to craft the music. A composer needs the tools. Only then will I feel positive about the future.

DD: In your many collaborations with the Sesame Street Muppets, and with the New York Pops your ensembles have performed music that is sometimes looked down upon by elitists. What is your opinion on popular American and musical theatre literature in regards to its place in the classical canon?

JC: Now, let me just say that good is good. I am not an elitist. I love Bach, Brahms, Mozart, Schubert, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Verdi as much as I love Joe Raposo's *Sing Sing A Song*, a child's folksong, a musical by Stephen Sondheim or Richard Rodgers, or theater works by our contemporary theater and opera composers. A wonderful song by the Beatles can be as great as a lied (song) by Schubert. I love melody and music performed by performers in natural acoustics. I love when performers sing in a healthy manner. Unfortunately so much popular music is performed today through horrific sound systems.

DD: What new choral/orchestral/theatre composers should we keep our eye on?

JC: It is hard to have a favorite. One of my favorite living American theater composers is Adam Guettel. Last year, EVUSA premiered a piece by Josh Schmidt. He is a wonderful composer as well! I enjoyed working with two young men in this recording project; Michael Gilbertson and Zachary Wolfe, whose works are represented on the CD. I have supported Nico Muhly since his student days at Juilliard and expect to continue to hear some great scores from him. Then again, let me not forget the others represented on the recording, including Robert Beaser, Jennifer Higdon, and David Ludwig. I am looking for the new Verdi and the new Stravinsky.



DD: How is your vocal ensemble different from the many others out there today?

JC: My model of EVUSA is unique in that I cast the ensemble based on the music. A large chorus should not be singing intimate music and vice versa. What works for my fine professional choral artists won't work for volunteer singers. I choose the best singers for the music at hand and for the project in which I am involved. My professional component is the basis of this CD but I sprinkled the ensemble with extra singers here and there, depending upon the music being recorded. In addition to casting for each piece, I have my choruses memorize as much as possible. Singers cannot have their heads buried in the scores.

DD: How has being a female choral conductor affected your career? Have there been extra barriers that you've had to take down, or is sexism a thing of the past in orchestral/choral music?

JC: Sexism reigns in the world of conductors worse than in most professions. I was once thrown off the podium at a major audition, by a major conductor and told to my face by the chorus' administrator that I had no chance to get the job because I was female. I was the token woman in a couple of searches and knew that I wasted my time even going to the finals. I can go on and on and tell you stories, but why bother. Life is too short. I know what I am doing and a lot of men (and some other women) do not like that. It has not always been easy. If I took all the sexist comments personally, I would have given up years ago. Why bother? It is their problem.



DD: Do you wish to endorse a candidate for president this year?

JC: All I can say is that I am so proud that I served as Associate Music Director of Sesame Street and I want the show to continue. Take a look at my website. I have **a quote there from Big Bird: "I love to sing with Judy." Hey, these Muppeteers are brilliant artists and they are part of every American household.**

DD: What's next for you and EVUSA?

JC: 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. We are hard at work fund raising for the project.

DD: Anything else you want the NY theatre/arts community to know about you or the album?

JC: Please purchase a copy, support EVUSA, sit back and listen. Please do not copy your friend's copy. I feel sure that you will feel proud of being an American.

Judith Clurman and members of Essential Voices USA, with guest Lucie Arnaz, will be performing the song they recorded last spring for Marvin Hamlisch's children's book, *MARVIN MAKES MUSIC*, at the book signing at the Barnes & Noble on East 86th Street and Lexington Avenue on Nov 8th at 7:00pm. You can also hear them at Macy's holiday window unveiling on Nov 15th, at Herald's Square, at 5:00pm.

You can purchase a copy of *CELEBRATING THE AMERICAN SPIRIT* on iTunes, Amazon, or directly from Sono Luminus.

DAVID DAVILA is half of the song-writing duo Havrilla & Davila, author of the Tex-Mex plays *ADAN Y JULIO*, *MEN OF GOD*, *CREDO*, *REQUERDOS OF MY LIFE*, and *AZTEC PIRATES AND THE INSIGNIFICANCE OF LIFE ON MARS*. He is a self proclaimed Voxist, a Diva enthusiast, and founder of Lone Star Theatre Co. You can catch the premiere of his new song cycle *TALES FROM HIGHWAY 281* at the INTAR Theatre on Nov 17th. Wanna talk about it? www.daviddavila.net EMAIL HIM | FACEBOOK | TWITTER | OTHER POSTS BY THIS AUTHOR