

EvanstonReview

ESO presents songs to soothe the soul

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January 27, 2011

By [DOROTHY ANDRIES](#) Contributor

American composer Gwyneth Walker, whose work "The Promised Land," will receive its world premiere at the upcoming Evanston Symphony Orchestra concert, is particularly pleased to be writing for a community orchestra.

"Most of the orchestras in the United States are community orchestras," she said, when reached by telephone at her home on a dairy farm in Braintree, Vermont.

Walker composes full time producing more than 130 works for orchestra, band, piano, solo voice and chorus. "I attend the Vermont Philharmonic in the Barre Opera House, and it's so much fun. People go to listen to the music and have a good time. We see our neighbors in the audience and when the orchestra comes on stage, we see more people we know."

Folk tunes

Walker's piece for soprano and orchestra is a set of arrangements of four traditional American folk songs and spirituals referencing the afterlife. The titles are "Every Night When the Sun Goes Down," "The Morning Train," "All My Trials," and "Walk On Up to Heaven."

"I first heard Walker's music a while back when I was looking for a soprano," said the ESO's music director Lawrence Eckerling. "I was listening to Michelle Areyzaga's recording 'The Sun is Love,' and I was blown away." That 2005 CD, with Areyzaga accompanied by Jamie Shaak, included Walker's settings of five poems by E.E. Cummings, as well as settings of poems by Persian poet Rumi and American poet May Swenson.

The conductor wanted to hear more, so he traveled from his home in Glenview out to Wentz Concert Hall at North Central College in Naperville where Areyzaga was singing the world premiere of Walker's song cycle "*La Temura*" (Tenderness), using Spanish-language poems by Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral.

"I sat down at the concert and found Gwyneth sitting right in front of me," Eckerling recalled. "I talked to her later and told her I would like our orchestra to present the songs. But they were written for a string orchestra, so what would I do with my brass department?" To which Walker replied, "I'll write something for you and Michelle."

Eckerling is delighted with the result. "These songs are completely accessible and totally tonal," he declared. "The audience can come to the concert and just bathe in the music."

He has played the piano accompaniment which Walker wrote before composing the full score. "This has given me real insight in how this work should be conducted," he insisted. "So many things are ambiguous in musical markings. For example, there is a dot, which means a note should be short. But how short? By playing the piano accompaniment I have become familiar with the idiomatic aspect of her music."

Areyzaga learned of Gwyneth Walker's music through her vocal coach, legendary soprano Maria Lagios. "She also urged me to contact the composer," she said. "Then I learned that she was coming to Chicago to take part in a national choral convention, and I thought perhaps I could sing for her and she could give me some coaching on how to approach her work. We've stayed in touch ever since."

Popular soloist

At the Jan. 30 concert Areyzaga will also be the symphony's soloist in Mahler's Symphony No. 4. The concert opens with "Preludio Sinfonico" by Puccini. She previously sang with the Evanston Symphony in a program which included the Poulenc "Gloria" and several "Songs of the Auvergne" by Canteloube. Locally, she has appeared with the North Shore Choral Society, the Ars Viva Orchestra and the Lake Forest Symphony, as well as at the Ravinia Festival numerous times.

Because of her strong voice and sweet nature, Areyzaga is in demand for performances throughout the country and appeared in Carnegie Hall in 2007.

"Michelle has a very expressive voice," Walker said, with obvious admiration. "It comes from her soul."

'Songs of Heaven'

Evanston Symphony Orchestra at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, 50 Arts Circle, Evanston. 2:30 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 30. \$27, children 12 and under free. (847) 864-8804 or visit www.evanstonsymphony.org