



BELLINGHAM *Chamber Chorale*

Interview with Composer Reginald Unterseher

What are the special challenges and delights writing choral music? How do you approach a choral composition?

I started writing for choirs when I became a choir director, and pieces grew out of programming needs. I would have a particular theme or organizing structure for a concert or other performance, and there would be a missing piece somewhere. Though composing had taken a back seat to performing for quite a while, I had written for various vocal and instrumental forces ever since I was in elementary school, so it just seemed natural to write something. As a singer and voice teacher and conductor, the capabilities of different voices were part of my natural sound palette, so it was a good fit.

With any piece, whether choral, solo, chamber music, or orchestra, there is always some sort of need to say something that I think hasn't been said in a particular way. In choral or vocal solo, the words, the structure of the lyrics or poetry, provide a framework, so I have to find words that work for the way I write. I read a lot of poetry, and find many, many wonderful poems that don't feel right as songs or choral pieces to me. When I got the packet of poems for this project from Ryan, I was delighted at how many really wonderful ones there were.

What drew you to "Elixir of the Solar Spectrum"?

I settled on "Elixir" very quickly for several reasons. First, I only write about things that are very important to me, and bees are very important to all of us. I grew up on a farm, and have always felt very connected to agriculture. I have been following issues around hive collapse disorder with great concern. My youngest child is an apprentice bee keeper. I want to do anything I can do to create something that helps us focus on these issues. Second, the poem calls attention to bees without preaching, which is often the most effective way to bring things to light. Third, the structure of the poem is such that I could take the words and apply some compositional techniques that I really wanted to use. When poems are more narrative, composers can get stuck writing big block chords moving all together. Nothing wrong with that, but it is not the only thing! This poem allowed me to set out the line then play with it-- give it to various parts, play with the rhythmic structure, overlap things, typical sorts of things we do in polyphonic writing. Not all of it is polyphonic, there are several sections that are that exact "big block chords moving all together" technique that I just mentioned.

How does living in the Northwest influence your style?

Northwest composers write in a great variety of styles, as this concert will illustrate. Some regions have a more identifiable "sound". For instance, I have a pretty good track record of identifying Minnesota composers, though not perfect. The thread that connects



Reginald Unterseher, composer of 'Elixir of the Solar Spectrum', and Washington State Music Teacher's Association 'Composer of the Year' for 2013

so many Northwest composers is our attachment to nature. We all do it in different ways, of course, but it tends to be there.

You are active as a music director, choral and vocal coach and clinician, as well as a member of Male Ensemble NW where you sing with BCC's artistic director, Ryan Smit. How do these professional roles and personal experiences inform your composition process? Please share your composition process.

While I can write quickly when necessary, I am generally happier with the results when I let a concept, words, and instrumental and vocal forces fight it out in the back of my mind for a while before trying to write things out. I will often write sketches on scraps of paper that don't look at all like music to anyone else to remind me of certain ideas, textures, melodic or harmonic fragments, or simply shapes that occur to me. Then I write rough drafts where I just put down everything I can think of and not judge it too much, following whatever thread or structural idea I am working with. After that, I start cutting back and editing. I have been doing this long enough that the editor part of my brain kicks in earlier than it used to, so it is smoother than it used to be. Still, though, I do not like repeating myself, so I want every piece be true to its own internal integrity and not just throw in that chord or turn of phrase that worked last time. Even more than wanting to avoid repeating myself, though, is the desire to not repeat somebody else's style. There is way too much music right now that seems like an homage rather than composition. It drives me nuts. Write your own pieces! There is also a trend towards a simplistic, nice, pretty, boring style that sounds like the composer meant it to be movie music, but it sounds more like a soundtrack for a commercial to me.

Who are some of your favorite composers and why?

I grew up on Bartok and Bach and Vivaldi, so that music has always been at the center of my musical life. As a kid and teenager, the energy and vitality of Baroque music was always a draw. Bartok always fascinated me, especially how he could construct a harmonic sequence, but always with the perspective of someone who loved folk music. I loved his tonal language, so different from the Baroque and Classical composers, but with amazing internal logic. Later, I fell in love with Gesualdo, who could turn harmonic structure upside down and sideways in the most remarkable way, sort of like Escher drawings do. Then, I discovered Verdi and Puccini and other operatic composers, and learned how powerful melody can really be. What we generally call "classical" is not the only thing that interests me. I still remember the first time I heard "Pinball Wizard" by The Who. My first LP was the gunslinger album by Marty Robbins. I was always crazy for Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, for Joni Mitchell, for Yes, for Emerson, Lake, and Palmer, for The Police and Sting, for Pat Metheny, the list goes on and on.

Please share words of wisdom and advice for aspiring composers, especially young composers.

The most important thing a young composer can do is simply write a lot and don't be afraid to throw it away and start over. Write what you want to hear, regardless of style or expectations. Learn to play lots of instruments, and sing a lot, whether you think you have a good voice or not. Talk people into playing and singing your music, and listen to what they have to say, whether you agree with it or not. Sometimes you have to help them work past their prejudices and expectations, but really, the best composition teacher you will ever have will be the people trying to bring your ideas into time and space from what you have written down.