

## Music Review: Camerata, Galbraith premiere stirring prayer for peace

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By Eric Haines

Pittsburgh composer Nancy Galbraith's 30-year career continues to take on new dimensions. Her latest endeavor, "Sacred Songs and Interludes," gracefully integrates her characteristic rhythmic harmonic progressions with Middle-Eastern and Far-Eastern tunes and modes in a work that is both a sensitive celebration of humankind's rich diversity and a powerful musical prayer for wholeness and peace. The composition was commissioned and premiered by the Pittsburgh Camerata in a stirring concert on Saturday at Sixth Presbyterian Church in Squirrel Hill.

Galbraith based each of the 10 movements of "Sacred Songs and Interludes" on texts borrowed from the poetry and canonical literature of the world's seven principal religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Taoism. Scored for 35 instruments, including percussion and seven different flutes, the work is folk-like and linearly through-composed, foregoing the pro forma approach to setting religious writings.

The work begins with the Buddhist chant and mantra, "Sabbe satta sukhi hontu" ("may all things be well") and "Namu Amida Butsu," which then becomes a leitmotiv and the coda. The percussion instruments, electronic keyboard and the array of flutes maintained an Eastern flavor, corresponding to the geographical origins of the majority of the religions. But Galbraith morphed the Buddhist "Enlightenment" sixth movement seamlessly into two diatonically structured sections from the Christian Ordinary of the Mass.

"Sacred Songs and Interludes" is not a meandering collection of miniatures. The over-arching process builds to a gentle but satisfying climax followed by the blissful coda.

Percussionists Thomas Earley and Tracey Whorton played with restrained nuance, never letting the instruments overpower the ensemble. Flutist Alberto Almarza shaded his various instruments to fit the diverse styles.

The work features solos for mezzo-soprano and baritone, and the Camerata's music director, Rebecca Rollett, chose two top-notch singers. Kara Cornell's voice was lyric and flexible, and soared through her top register beautifully. Thomas Octave sang with effortless power and expression throughout his entire range.

The concert included a Magnificat by 17th century Venetian composer Francesco Cavalli. It's a mini-concerto grosso for voices, with the terraced dynamics achieved by smaller groups of singers. The work also mixes the Venetian polychoral style with homophonic style of the late 17th century. Rollett intended to highlight the antiphonal aspect of the period by splitting the singers into two groups on either side of the chancel, but moving them to the transepts would have been more effective.

The concert began with J.S. Bach's motet "Der Gerechte Kommt um." Rollett's expressive phrasing and the singers' sensitive shading were overwhelmed by the organ.

*The concert repeats Saturday at 8 p.m. at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Highland Park.*