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## 'Southern Cross' wonderfully performed by Worcester Chorus

By Joyce Tamer TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER

**WORCESTER** — The Worcester Chorus, in the final concert of Music Worcester's 151st season, presented "The Southern Cross" at the First Unitarian Church last night and drew its program from areas of the Southern Hemisphere where the Southern Cross constellation is visible — South America, Australia and Africa.

Though the Southern Cross is not visible in Worcester, many stars shone brightly last night: Music Worcester, as it continues to present varied, interesting and affordable concert programs; conductor Chris Shepard, with his innovative programming featuring ethnically diverse works and contemporary music by composers relatively unknown in the United States; pianist Sima Kustanovich, who continues to brighten our world with her amazing technical facility and exquisite musicality; and the chorus itself, which continues to grow and develop in its repertoire and the quality of its singing while encouraging, through its commissions the work of upcoming composers.

The program opened with the wonderfully rhythmic "Misa Criolla" by Ariel Ramirez. This Mass, written in 1964, was in response to the Second Vatican Council's ruling allowing the Mass to be celebrated in vernacular languages rather than Latin. The text uses the five prayers of the ordinary of the Mass, but, since Ramirez is an Argentinean, the prayers are sung in Spanish. The accompaniment uses indigenous instruments and rhythms. In this performance, a guitar was used instead of the double-stringed charango and the tympani, with a rather flabby, unauthentic sound, was used in place of the native legüero. Though sung with a pleasing tone quality and rhythmic precision, the performance was lacking in intensity and excitement.

This was soon forgotten during the next group of songs by Richard Charlton, a living Australian composer. Using as his text five poems by William Blake, Charlton fashioned what he called "A Cycle of the Infinite in All Things." Using lush and lyrical melodies and judicious use of sound effects, he created a perfect marriage of words and music, which the chorus performed beautifully. An additional lovely piece by Charlton, "The Birds Go By," was commissioned by the Worcester Chorus and premiered last night.

The chorus also commissioned "Tango" by the young Australian composer Philip Jameson, and it also premiered last night. "Tango" and Jameson's "Night Journey" are more harmonically adventurous and rhythmically interesting than the pieces of Jameson's older colleague, but equally delightful to hear.

The final composition on the first half of the program was a most unusual wordless choral work by Sarah Hopkins using what Shepard referred to as overtone singing. The piece opened with mysterious closed mouth humming that gave way to open mouth vowel sounds eventually backed by added drone tones sung by alternating voice parts.

The piece built to an intense wordless climax, followed by a sustained and gradual decrease in volume. During its dramatic, pianissimo ending, the chorus was joined on cue and in perfect counterpoint by the sound of the 9:15 train from Boston chugging its way into Worcester!

As a change of pace and sound, the second half of the program opened with three instrumental compositions. Vanessa Holroyd on flute and Kustanovich on piano gave a beautiful and sensitive performance of Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 5, an unusual and interesting arrangement of the original scoring for soprano and cellos. Frederick Krug gave a capable reading of Villa-Lobos *Guitar Prelude* No. 1, and Kustanovich ended the grouping with a stunning performance of Astor Piazzolla's "Adiós Nonino," characterized by exquisite tonal coloration, beautifully executed dynamic contrasts and rhythmic intensity.

The chorus exhibited its versatility in “A South African Trilogy,” sung in Zulu alternating with English.

The program ended with Latin and African chants, which expressed the universality of the spiritual life throughout the world and throughout time. With the chorus singing from the balcony and joined by piano, organ and percussion accompaniment, the rafters were raised in a thrilling and uplifting ending to a wonderfully performed concert.

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