

on its ear

Belinda Bruce listens to choral innovators *musica intima*

IN THE CHORAL ARENA, challenging the norms can be as simple as taking a step forward or raising an arm during a song. So, by increasingly choosing to incorporate movement, drama and narrative into its performances, “intima” (as this choir is known in singing circles) seems bent on breaking a few boundaries. Exploring uncharted territory—dead languages, anyone?—while turning the vocal community on its ear have been hallmarks of the chamber ensemble, which consists of a dozen singers and no conductor.

During a recent rehearsal in the cozy annex of the Redeemer Lutheran Church, in Vancouver’s Shaughnessy, I watched the group’s collaborative music making. Seated in a semi-circle, the ensemble hashed through the minutiae of various love songs for its spring series. For more than two hours, soprano Siri Olesen called attention to subtle shifts in cadence and tone, almost measure by measure. Her colleagues interjected suggestions or jokes, followed by discussion or laughter, and then they’d pick it up again, working through ideas via eye contact, foot tapping and nods of the head. Eventually Olesen raised her hand and ended the rehearsal with a casual, “Okay. Looks like we’re out of time.”

It’s a regrettable irony that in most choirs, the singers don’t have a voice. A choir’s success is usually credited more to the vision of the conductor and less to its human complement of skill, personality and expression. A predictable dullness can set in. *musica intima*, on the other hand, has managed to keep things fresh for 16 years by being a quintessential artist-run, consensus-based cooperative.

The group’s distinct form of self-direction is also visible in a 2006 performance video of James MacMillian’s “Christus Vincit” (available on YouTube). Initially, the shots highlight individuals, but as the piece builds and the voices interweave, the camera reveals that the choir is standing in a circle. You can watch the shifting leadership and creative teamwork: eyes cast from one to another around the loop, a nod here, an emphatic flick of the score there. Singing full tilt the group sounds twice its size.

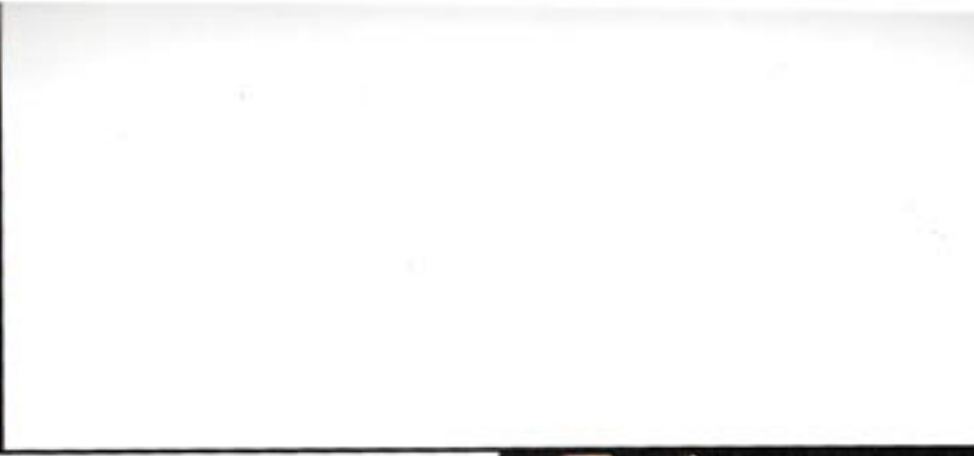
Since its 1992 founding by friends over a few glasses of wine, only one original member of the group remains: alto Marianne de Kleer. But *musica intima* hasn’t stopped “pushing the vocal envelope,” according to Simon Fraser University music professor David McIntyre. It sets itself apart through unexpected song choices, unique arrangements (often by members) and unusual staging during concerts. “If they continue, they will be spoken of in the same breath as the world’s leading choirs,” McIntyre said.

The choir’s recordings range from *Invocation*, focusing on 20th-century sacred music, to the best-selling Christmas disc *nativité* (released by CBC Records) and the recent *Tormis: Forgotten Peoples*, which offers ancient folk songs in Estonian and Vepsic (a dead language), interpreted and reimagined by an Estonian composer. The group also champions the work of progressive contemporary Canadian composers; this spring it will premiere *On Monsieur’s Departure*, commissioned from Vancouver’s Jeffrey Ryan. The ensemble takes to the road too; this year it’s off to Cork, Ireland, and the World Choral Symposium in Copenhagen, Denmark.

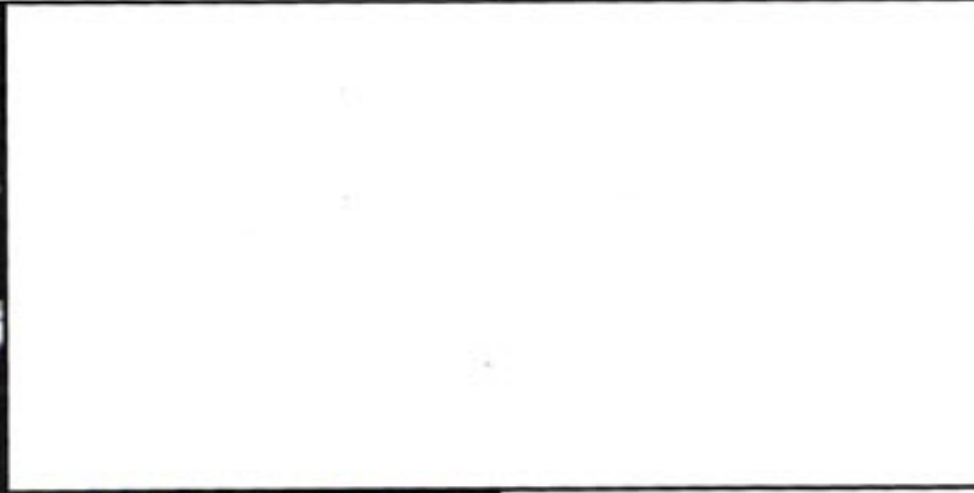
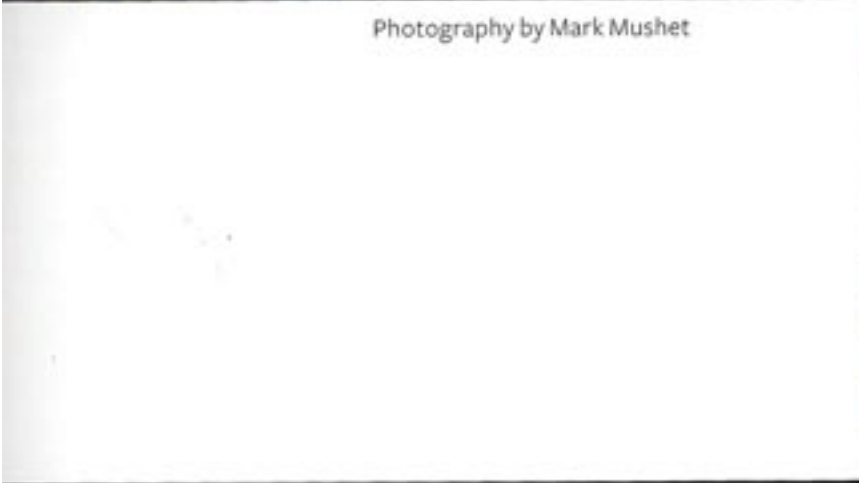
As if tailor-made for the group, the symposium’s theme is “using space creatively.” *musica intima* will have the opportunity to showcase its talent for creative movement, staging and subtle drama. For example, one piece in its repertoire, “You Have Ravished My Heart” (with text taken from the Bible’s “Song of Solomon”), compares a woman to a walled garden. Four members will position themselves in the middle of the stage, encircled by the remaining eight, until the moment the music opens up, when the entire ensemble will turn towards the audience.

Closer to home, *musica intima* has collaborated with the likes of Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, pianist/composer Uri Caine, writer/broadcaster Bill Richardson, the Coastal Sound Music Academy, and cellist Steven Isserlis. It also lends out an ever-growing library of its signature musical arrangements (listed on its website www.musicalintima.org), popular with concertgoers and choral directors alike. As McIntyre notes: “You can’t do something for as long and as well as they’ve done it without a lot of love in the room.” Small but dynamic, the group influences BC’s already vibrant choral scene.

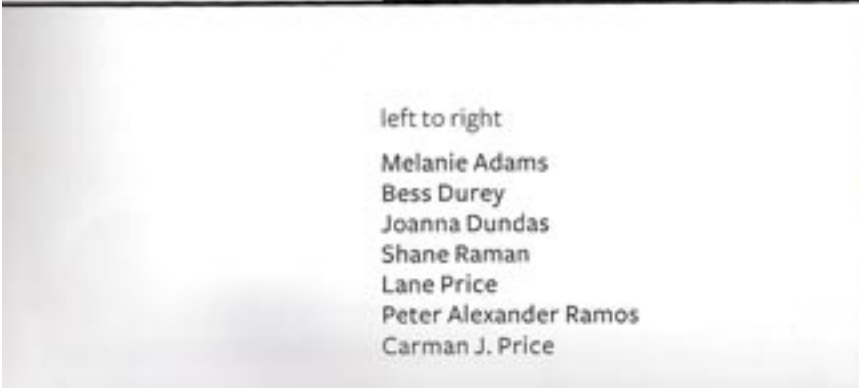
Turn the page for excerpts from my conversation with five members following the recent rehearsal.



Photography by Mark Mushet



left to right
Melanie Adams
Bess Durey
Joanna Dundas
Shane Raman
Lane Price
Peter Alexander Ramos
Carman J. Price





Alto **Marianne de Kleer (MDK)**, soprano **Joanna Dundas (JD)**, alto **Caitlin MacRae (CM)**, bass **Matthew MacTavish (MM)** and soprano **Siri Olesen**

On Pushing That Envelope

MDK: The turning point for us was when we did a show of all the music of [20th-century French composer] Francis Poulenc. It was a semi-staged production and the first time we incorporated movement, drama and a narrative into our performance. It had lighting, costumes and props. Once we proved to ourselves that we could do that, we knew we would never appreciate a concert the same way again.

CM: We've done the music of Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, and scores are often not just notes on the page but also pictures that you have to sing. He's an artist as well as a composer.

MM: Some of the sounds he wants can't be notated, so he integrates stannotation with more graphic elements.

CM: His penmanship is beautiful: a mix of calligraphy and art. You can have aspects of the picture that incorporates a pen stroke that's very thick and gradually gets thinner. So, naturally, how do you sing that? You'd start low and get softer, and then the pitch would go up at the end.

MDK: It makes it different every time, too.

CM: It goes beyond what you can put on a musical staff. For singers, these sounds are called extended vocal techniques.

On Wine, the CBC and Song

MDK: [Original members] Michael Murray and Tina Young decided it would be cool to start something like this. It was originally eight singers, and we wanted to work with the model of singing without a conductor. We'd get together on Sunday nights around the dining-room table, have a glass of wine and read through music. We did a few concerts around town but it wasn't serious. Two years later we decided we wanted to enter the CBC competition for amateur choirs. The minimum requirement for the chamber choir category was 12 singers, so we invited four friends to join. We ended up winning a couple of prizes, so that was a little bit of money to print posters, buy music and put a season together and start the ball rolling. We owe our beginnings to the CBC for sure.

On "Owning It"

MM: One of the things that makes the group special is the self-direction aspect. There's an element of communal ownership of the music that we're singing. Inevitably, because we're all accomplished musicians and we're committed to a professional career, everyone has opinions, but there's always a sense of the group as a whole being the most important thing.

SO: Just to elaborate on that a little bit: music is always the most important thing and we all have a very deep respect for each other. That's what makes this work.

MDK: You don't get emotionally attached to decisions; there is no right or wrong way to interpret a piece. We just have to find our common interpretation.

SO: And interpretations evolve over time, too, which is another great thing about this group... a piece changes as we change and becomes something that we really own.

Siri Olesen
Caitlin MacRae
Michael Mori
Marianne de Kleer
Matthew MacTavish

On Arranging for Twelve

CM: I think the variety and talents of the people we have give a wider vocal range and a wider palette of colours and textures than your average vocal group. The number of people [is our] only limitation; you can't get a huge wash of sound for a long time because there aren't enough people to sustain it.

MM: We do have a piece in this season's repertoire by Vancouver composer Jordan Nobles ["Coriolis"] and it's for twelve voices.

MDK: That was written especially for us. When we're working with our own arrangements, the arrangers know exactly how they hear it in their heads, so they are able to effectively communicate that and get the most authentic interpretation.

MM: There's also the opportunity of collaboration between the arranger and the ensemble, whereas if an arranger is just writing for a publisher, they're writing for a hypothetical choir.

JD: It's not uncommon for us to get a few editions throughout the rehearsal period. We get to a certain point, rehearsal six, and say, "No more changes." Sometimes you've got to put your foot down.

MDK: One arranger made changes to the last few bars and taped it into our scores the night of the concert!

On Cues, Choreography and the Scramble Position

MM: When you're in a group of trained singers that are used to singing with each other, it's amazing how little we need cues. And the leader for the piece isn't necessarily the one giving all the cues.

JD: The challenge is when we don't have music—it's memorized—how do we show that? We use the back of the head or very small gestures.

CM: We try not to use any hand gestures that look like conducting. Nobody ever does a cutoff. It sometimes depends on your position on the stage. We have the "tie-fighter position" and the "scramble position," for example. Often there are only two people in front and everyone else behind. Obviously, the ones in front can't look back, so they give head cues. Most of that is decided in rehearsal. We all know what's going to happen and we're all feeling that rhythm inside ourselves.

MM: We're getting into more choreography and memorizing more material, more non-standard ways of standing or moving within pieces and between pieces. Movement and different standing positions are ways of exploring and emphasizing different aspects of the music, and we've been getting great audience response.

JD: We hope that any movement that we add heightens the experience. We're visual creatures; all you have to do is step once and people suddenly start to pay more attention.

CM: There are a lot of people that perform the same way, so when people see us they say, "That was different than anything I've ever seen before." That's what we want, not only an excellent musical performance but also to give them something that helps them expand their boundaries a bit.

On Personal-Development Boot Camp

CM: A lot of groups that have been around for a long time have internal conflicts that don't get resolved. That wouldn't work for this group. If you've got a personal issue with someone in the group, you've got to get through it. I think it's a very healthy and mature thing to do. I have sung with this group since I was 18 years old. I've definitely had an extremely strong musical education through the group as well as a personal-development boot camp. And it continues to be so. We're continually challenged not only musically but also as humans.

On Cultural Syntheses

CM: There's a spirituality in the air that takes in the values of First Nations culture and a lot of the underlying values of many cultures—respect, closeness to the land and things that we can learn from nature. People are responding to music that uses spirituality as a jumping-off point. It doesn't have to be a clash of cultures. There is some kind of synthesis going on.

MDK: There have been some arrangements of First Nations traditional songs that we've done. People totally respond to them; they love it.

CM: It's a little different because it's all very proprietorial. You have to get permission before you can record a song. It's a bit more complicated than just picking up the music at the store.

MM: There's something here about Canadian culture: What can Canada contribute to the larger world? I'm talking about values and building bridges, inclusivity, respect for other cultures, exploring other cultures. Those things are central to Canadian culture and I'm happy to be exploring them and seeing how far this ensemble can go in bringing that to others.

MDK: [Our style is] connected, open, emotional. The music that we do best has deep emotional content and I feel that when the magic happens that we're all connected emotionally as well as musically. With our voices we're spinning world filigree in the centre of our arc. And we're all collectively handing this off to the audience.

On 12 Disciples and musica maxima

MDK: When we have auditions, not only do we have the person sing for us, but we feel them out to see if they're open to working in a team environment and ready to step up to the plate and offer to lead. Every one of us needs to lead in this group.

MM: The idea of leadership is constantly being challenged in the group because it's a different model—rotating, shared, leadership with an open palm. In a lot of ways, and in different contexts besides a musical ensemble, it seems like the wave of the future.

CM: It's clumsy and time-consuming at times...

MDK: ...but respectful, full of love.

JD: We've talked about adding members or subs for a certain piece because we come across works that we'd like to do that are 12 or 16 parts but a really big sing to sustain. We've periodically discussed what we've called "musica maxima," adding a person per part, but we haven't yet. ☹