

"Waking" a compelling world premiere

By Sabine Kortals

Special to The Denver Post [9-29-08]

"I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow. I learn by going where I have to go."

Set to such gently provocative prose by American poet Theodore Roethke, Terry Schlenker's "The Waking" — for choir and chamber orchestra — is an emotionally compelling musical experience that recalls the compositional spirit of Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Commissioned by the St. Martin's Chamber Choir and Augustana Arts, the world premiere of "The Waking" saturated St. John's Episcopal Cathedral on Sunday afternoon with a haunting, harmonically expansive soundscape comprising open choral unisons and a rhythmically mesmerizing orchestral accompaniment that was ably delivered by the Musica Sacra Chamber Orchestra.

Under the focused guidance of Musica Sacra conductor Catherine Sailer, "The Waking" served as the hub of a program that was otherwise entirely dedicated to Vaughan Williams' work.

Indeed, Timothy Krueger, St. Martin's artistic director, devised a brilliantly executed setting from which to launch the choir's 15th season: a concert collaboration with Musica Sacra that commemorates the 50th anniversary of Vaughan Williams' death, thereby illuminating the significant, durable influence of the English composer's songs, chamber music and otherwise varied body of work.

Each carefully chosen selection — from "Fantasia on Greensleeves," "Three Shakespeare Songs," "Five Mystical Songs" and "Flos Campi" — was meticulously presented by Krueger and the professional musicians under his direction to reflect Vaughan Williams' characteristically straightforward, yet nuanced, compositional voice.

In particular, Krueger's refined articulation of sensuality in "Flos Campi" (Flower of the Field) was captivating. It showcased the smooth, warm tone of Jacquelyn Schwandt on viola. As well, harpist Barbara Lepke-Sims lent a rich, flowing sensibility to the graceful "Greensleeves" melody, complemented by Sailer's thoughtfully unhurried pacing thereof.

And as soloist in "Five Mystical Songs," baritone David Farwig embodied in the satisfying finale a combination of elements that at least partly define the sophisticated, enduring quality of the choir's collective artistry — scrupulous preparation, intelligent and pleasing programs, and a shared commitment to true musical collaboration amongst themselves and with others, for example the polished players of Musica Sacra.