

Recording Reviews

MARJORIE JOHNSTON

Longing for Home: The American Hymn Tradition. The Choir of Saint Peter's Church, Saint Louis, David Sinden, Director/Organist. Scott Roberts, Organ; Mark Pye, Oboe; Gary Cole, Executive Producer; Daniel Ruder, Recording Engineer (Regent Records, Ltd, October, 2020), Amazon audio CD, \$16.98; MP3, \$9.49 (iTunes, plus multiple online streaming services).

The introduction to this recording's liner notes beautifully articulates its intent. In just four paragraphs, Richard Longmann gives a concise (yet comprehensive) history of American hymnody, including shape-note singing, spirituals, and folk music, plus the diversity contained in each genre borne of this country's earliest settlers. Shape-note hymns were notated in a way that made it easier for everyone to read, and they were published in pocket-sized hymnals so the newly discovered music could be widely shared. In today's world, when it's somewhat rare to find a child who even takes piano lessons (or a child who is required to do anything he or she doesn't *want* to do), it's refreshing to be taken back to a time when such care was taken to encourage the distribution of high-quality sacred music.

I'm not sure how this CD came to my attention, but there it sat atop my "to review" stack, and I was delighted to give it a listen. The seventeen tracks on the disc showcase a "Who's-Who" of our best American composers and arrangers, many alive and well, and nine active members of AAM: Frank Boles, Robert Lehman, William Bradley Roberts, David Hurd, John Ferguson, David Sinden, David Ashley White,

Craig Phillips, and Dale Adelman. In a phone interview, Mr. Sinden explained that one of the goals of Regent Records, a company based in Wolverhampton, England, was to share American hymns and anthem settings with the British listening public. It is St. Peter's second venture with Regent, and it sounds like a happy partnership.

This review doesn't cover every piece on the disc, but every track is commendable. A good number of well-known hymns are presented, starting with the opening track, *How firm a foundation*, arranged by James Erb. It's an interesting and likable setting with an organ introduction that is true to the tune's Sacred Harp ancestry. Some may already know David Ashley White's setting of *Amazing Grace*. It features an oboe part (White himself is an oboist), but I think the anthem would work well with any number of instruments on the solo part (there are a few deceptive harmonies that give this arrangement its own special place). And with his setting of *Wondrous love*, Robert Lehman has once again come up with an arrangement of a classic that is likely to make you archive the one you've loved for many years. Singers of each voice part will believe they have the best line!

I did not know the hymn, *Jesus paid it all*, and Mr. Sinden's setting is a wonderful introduction to it. The organ provides a quiet but sturdy underpinning throughout, and the choir sings the Elvina M. Hall text with conviction and dignity. Mr. Sinden came to know the hymn when playing for a funeral and said he did his best to put an Anglican spin on it. Mission accomplished! His descendant reference to the tune RESIGNATION layers in one more American hymn. There are two hymns on the disc that come directly from *The Hymnal 1982*: Calvin Hampton's *O love of God, how strong and true* (de Tar) and David Hurd's *Ye who claim the faith of Jesus* (Julion). They need no dressing up and are sung and played as if for a Sunday morning service. Episcopalians in the United States might take these new-classic hymns for granted, but some in the target audience in Great Britain will be hearing these hymns for the first time.

I was especially taken with John Ferguson's arrangement of *Shall we gather at the river*. It's a little over six minutes long, and the several modulations are very effective. The unison singing may not always gel here (a challenge in every choir), but intonation pops into place when the choir breaks into parts, supported by a first-rate bass section. The bubbling, watery organ introduction and the creative accompaniment are the primary factors that call me to this setting (and perhaps some of us are ready for a change from the well-established Raymond Wilding-White/Copland adaptation).

The earliest version of the tune we now know as LAND OF REST is *Longing for home*, a shape-note tune. About midway through the disc, the two-part vocal setting introduces *Variations on an Old American Tune* for organ, arranged by American-Canadian composer, Zachary Wadsworth. Mr. Sinden came to know Mr. Wadsworth through a previous commission and knew he would be the ideal choice for this work. Clever writing and skillful playing by Mr. Sinden (on this, plus one other track) bring out a chuckle now and then, while the last variation is glorious and fulfilling. Not only is this work a nice contrast to the choral pieces, but the American spirit of the recording is grounded by this welcome ten-minute addition to the collection.

Mr. Sinden said that most of the choral material on the recording was new to his choir, and the production schedule presented challenges.

The whole experience was so disconnected due to Covid. The title *Longing for home* ended up being just perfect and really poignant. We were so keenly wanting to sing together and longing for our church home during lockdown. When the disc was finally completed in October of 2020, we had a Zoom release party, and almost all of the composers attended; they were so gracious.

In his setting of *Come, thou fount of every blessing*, Frank Boles provides a satisfying balance of choir and organ that makes good musical sense.

Mr. Sinden and I discussed how Mr. Boles' writing is sophisticated and demanding, yet can be accessible to groups with varying levels of ability. In the case of this anthem, the sopranos must have a solid high range, and St. Peter's sopranos deliver. Regent Records was responsible for the order of the track list, and wisely chose this as the closing track.

I really like this recording. The sound of St. Peter's choir is unique—it's a semi-professional ensemble with most singers coming from the St. Louis metro area. Mr. Sinden said that he appreciates the mix of new and young, recent singers with established veterans (including one woman with an impressive tenure of fifty years). This is a well-prepared choir with good intonation and determined attention to the printed phrasing and articulation. Additionally, the choir is very musical. After hearing each anthem, I thought the composer or arranger would be pleased to have this representation of

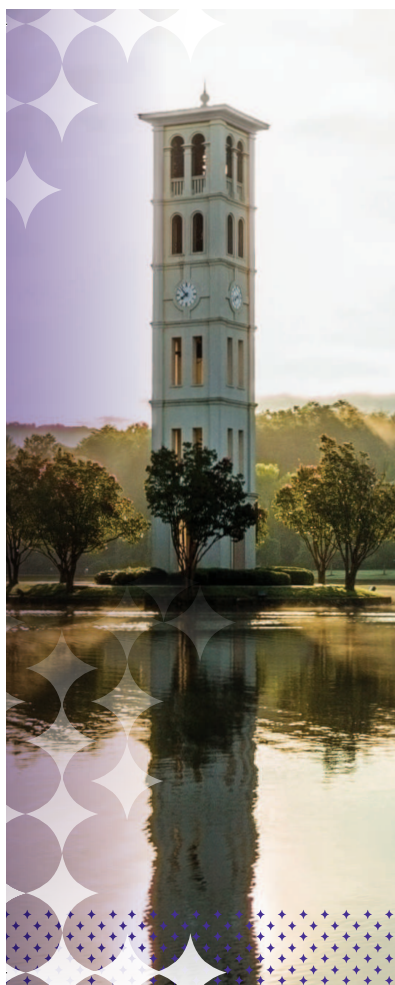
his or her work on the market. It also gives us a clue that David Sinden is someone to hire for conferences and choral workshops, as he clearly knows how to get the most out of a choir. I learned that he was on the 2017 faculty of the Mississippi Conference on Church Music and Liturgy; he was too modest to give any details so I called conference staff accompanist David O'Steen, who was effusive in his praise:

David was fabulous! He was calm, cool, and collected at all times, but not passionless. He has an eloquent demeanor that makes people sit up and listen. Best of all, he improved the sound of the choir immediately. He can do anything musically and he's not theatrical or dramatic about it at all.

As an accomplished organist, Mr. Sinden has appeared at conventions for AAM, the Hymn Society of the

United States and Canada, and the Organ Historical Society.

This collection of anthems is both well conceived and well performed, and can provide fresh perspectives and ideas for church musicians in planning mode.



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