

# The Boston Musical Intelligen

*a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston*

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## Cantata Singers to Norton's Woods Did Come

by [STEVEN LEDBETTER](#)



Norton's Woods Center at AAAS

relationship between the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge and the Cantata Singers began Tuesday with a strong program of American vocal music in an auditorium rarely, if ever, used for public concerts. The series will continue on February 26<sup>th</sup> and March 15th.

At a time when a number of concert locations have become so busy that they are hard to book, or have been threatened with closure, any new venue for musical performances is valuable. Comfortably seating 225, with good sight lines everywhere, Norton's Woods Conference Center seems suitable for chamber ensembles or vocal recitals. A chamber orchestra might be possible, but it would be a tight squeeze, and it might produce an aggressively "present" sonority.

For the vocal recital on Tuesday night, the hall was bright in tone, almost too much so, but in general the acoustics were quite satisfactory, with one proviso. I sat on the left side during the first half; from that point, the piano tended to overwhelm the singer, especially when the dynamic required was *forte* and the vocal line was placed low in the singer's range. Following intermission I moved close to the center, where the balance was more satisfactory.

Allison Voth assembled and accompanied a shpw consisting largely of three substantial American song cycles of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: Aaron Copland's dozen songs for soprano by Emily Dickinson, Irving Fine's half-dozen songs to poems of Irene Orgel, for mezzo, entitled *Mutability*, and Samuel Barber's *Hermit Songs*, conceived for soprano Leontyne Price, a cycle of ten songs translated into English from Latin marginalia written by Irish monks,.

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A new

Since each of these cycles entails a substantial workout, several singers divided up the cycles and performed two or three songs apiece. This allowed wide participation and also avoided the difficulty, voiced by one participant after the event, of preparing the whole Dickinson cycle, which is “like training to run the Boston Marathon.”

The soloists, all members of the Cantata Singers ensemble, thus had the opportunity to present several songs, an arrangement that demonstrates the organization’s deep bench. For the Dickinson songs, four singers—Majie Zeller, Lisa Lynch, Kathy Howard, and Angelynne Hinson—divided the song equally. They are vocally demanding, especially for the large number of wide leaps that the singers must negotiate while maintaining a legato line as much as possible and expressing the texts clearly. The Fine cycle *Mutability* contains many of the same types of challenges, quite probably through a degree of influence from the Copland songs. The six songs were divided between Kimberly Leeds and Jennifer Webb. Barber’s *Hermit Songs* are cast in a generally more lyric mode without the wide changes of range, but the moods of the individual parts rage widely from religious passion to a short comic song wondering idly where a certain attractive young lady will spend the night (“I do know that fair Edan will not sleep alone”) or a contented celebration of the comfortable relationship between a monk and his cat.

The singing was uniformly of a high level, and it was a pleasure to hear all three cycles in a single evening, especially the Fine, which is almost never heard, though the Copland does not appear with great frequency either. (In 1985, at a Tanglewood symposium celebrating the composer’s 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, panelists were asked which underperformed Copland works they would encourage musicians to take up more frequently. Lukas Foss instantly chimed in, “The Dickinson Songs.”)

By way of framing the program of solos, a vocal quartet sang three of Copland’s “Old American Songs” in arrangements for four voices and piano. Lisa Lynch, Jennifer Webb, Michael Merullo, and Ron Williams opened with “Zion’s Walls” (the music later embedded in Copland’s opera *The Tender Land* with different words as “The promise of living”). They opened the second half with “Shall we gather at the river,” and closed the program with the most famous of them all, “Simple Gifts.”

Other members of the Cantata Singers will take part in the two future programs, providing a further indication of the vocal strength of the ensemble, and two very diverse programs again using the attractive space.

**Steven Ledbetter is a free-lance writer and lecturer on music. He got his BA from Pomona College and PhD from NYU in Musicology. He taught at Dartmouth College in the 1970s, then became program annotator at the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1979 to 1997.**

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