

# The Boston Globe

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2003

THE BOSTON GLOBE

## Program shows composer's many sides



FILE PHOTO/MICHAEL LUTCH

Elizabeth Patterson led *Gloriae Dei Cantores* in a world premiere of fiddler and composer Mark O'Connor's *Folk Mass* Tuesday.

New York news: Mark O'Connor had a busy day on Tuesday. The popular fiddler and composer performed with his Hot Swing Trio in New York's Alice Tully Hall; meanwhile, at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, *Gloriae Dei Cantores*, under conductor Elizabeth Patterson, was presenting the world premiere of his hourlong *Folk Mass*, composed in response to the events of Sept. 11.

*Gloriae Dei Cantores*, which is in residence at the Community of Jesus in Orleans, commissioned the a cappella work. O'Connor had composed his Ascension anthem "Let Us Move" for the singers,

and had performed the obligato fiddle part with them in Jordan Hall.

O'Connor described the new mass to his e-mail list by saying, "I just really wanted to be a compositional instrument for this message of hope."

ELIZABETH C PATTERSON

## TO THE GLORY OF GOD

How the English choral tradition inspired one of the US's most vibrant choirs



MICHAEL LUTCH

Elizabeth C. Patterson doesn't mince words when she recalls the genesis of her Cape Cod-based chorus, which grew to become the acclaimed *Gloriae Dei Cantores*.

'As a gathered group of people around a church, the singing was absolutely horrible. I don't think we were any different from any church situation. The singing was just not at its best. Somewhere along the way, this group rose up and said, "We really want to be serious about this. We want to do this as excellently as possible."

Parishioners and other listeners – even music critics – seem to agree that Patterson's ensemble does exactly that. Along with weekly services and a concert series at Church of the Transfiguration in Orleans, MA, *Gloriae Dei Cantores* (Singers to the Glory of God) has toured the world and made 27 self-produced recordings, including two superb recent releases: 'The Lord is My Shepherd', the third volume in the group's American

Psalmody series; and 'The Coming of Christ' (12/02).

Patterson and her ensemble didn't set out to make recordings, but demand prompted supply. 'Looking at the success when the choir began to get noticed, people said, "You should share this". We all felt that there were such weak, lukewarm or marred interpretations out there, if we could put out good models maybe that might allow some church choirs to tackle more difficult repertoire.'

The sacred works and folk literature that *Gloriae Dei Cantores* sings – mostly a cappella – range from pre-Renaissance music, Classical and Romantic works to 20th-century fare, including a hefty portion of domestic pieces. Their American Psalmody series contains settings by native-born composers, like Ives and Howland and by those who adopted the US, like Schoenberg and Milhaud.

With help from the retired Columbia University professor Craig Timberlake, Patterson began

exploring a repertoire of which she was unaware. 'I was as guilty as every other choir director out there of not knowing or educating myself on the American scene. So many American composers really just outdo themselves. There is such a high standard and quality. It's a shame – it seems like the repertoire has been so neglected.'

Patterson and company haven't neglected a trove of music in the 30 years since she began working with volunteer singers from all walks of life who now devote themselves to four rehearsals and one service a week. And this doesn't include concerts, tours and recordings. 'To have that kind of heartfelt commitment for something makes all the difference. Then it's not a hobby. It moves past doing it just for fun. As you begin to work, there's always a dry period where singers face the hard facts of vocal technique, development of voice, sense of form, historical knowledge and, most importantly, looking for the truth of that piece. That takes a lot of hard work.'

anybody out. They were capable of taking you to the utter ends of what you can do. It boosted my own ideas and gave me the backbone to not compromise, period, regardless of what was happening.'

When she returned, Patterson vowed to try to change what she deemed an US prejudice against amateur choirs. 'Where the English affected me most is that they have so many professional groups that come out of collegiate groups, but the singers don't earn their living from it. In the US there's a narrow interpretation. You have to be earning your living by it. If you're not being paid, you're just an amateur. Collegiate groups in England are not being paid, but they're anything but amateur. We began on that basis.'

*Gloriae Dei Cantores* isn't entirely repelled by business practices, but commerce isn't always the point. 'We want to slavishly hold on to the artistic rights of our recordings. Maybe that's some of my growing up and hearing horrible stories about how people were compromising for the bottom line.'

'To have a heartfelt commitment for something makes all the difference'

But Patterson believes the musical and human rewards are ample. 'There's a tremendous power to bringing a person out of fragmentation into a sense of wholeness. There are just so many offshoots of it, so many fruits that spin off that kind of commitment: a sense of deep fellowship, a sense of a job well done, a sense of pleasing God. So now the commitment level of the group is so high that people really scrap and fight to stay in. You can't sit on your laurels forever. There's so much literature out there. The challenges remain.'

Patterson, initially a pianist and organist, upped the choir's challenges after taking a sabbatical in the late 1970s to study at Cambridge University. There, she gravitated toward Mary Berry (for Gregorian chant), Mary Ports (harpsichord) and George Guest (English choral traditions), all of whom inspired her to maintain the loftiest standards. 'Compromise simply wasn't a question, nor was it a question of leaving

It breaks even. Maybe one day we might reach profit. We're in it for the mission and not for the money.'

Profitable or otherwise, the ensemble has harked in the opportunity to sing (in 18 languages) for audiences throughout the US, Europe and Russia, to perform on the soundtrack of *Lorenzo's Oil*, and to appear with the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra. Coming soon is a recording of music for chorus and serpent (the coiled 16th-century version of the cornett) with Boston Symphony trombonist Doug Yeo, and a possible disc devoted to Spanish works.

'Some of our own American composers are influenced by Spanish and South American rhythms. We got interested in it when we did some Ginastera. Because there's a real influx of South American and Mexican people, Spanish music has become more popular. We don't want to neglect that avenue either.'

Donald Rosenberg

The Lord is My Shepherd is reviewed on page A9

# Newsmakers

26.5 million The number of viewers who watched the season premiere of 'American Idol'—last Tuesday

## Once Upon a Time in Park City

ONE OF THE best films at this year's Sundance Festival is about a dwarf who digs trains, and stars Peter Dinklage, whom you've never heard of. One of the worst stars Macaulay Culkin. That's Sundance. On the one hand, there's the festival Robert Redford intended: 10 days of indie films with you-couldn't-drag-me-to-it premises, some of which turn out to be good. But then there's the Sundance that Hollywood stars use to hone—or manufacture—their edge. This year, A-listers like Al Pacino and Salma Hayek



**BEST IN SHOW:** The cast of the Sundance hit 'Pieces of April'

turned Main Street of Park City, Utah, into a red carpet. They dressed down in designer parkas, but their parties were VIP-only. One fan even tried scaling a wall to get into a Fox Searchlight bash.

But the films made the nonsense worthwhile. Almost. The dwarf movie ("The Station Agent") snagged a \$1.5 million deal from Miramax. Other winners: the wickedly funny

"Pieces of April," about a dysfunctional family's Thanksgiving; "American Splendor," a biopic about comic-book legend Harvey Pekar, and "thirteen," an unsettling film about two teen girls who do things we certainly didn't do when we were 13. And Culkin's "Party Monster"? Well, the audience didn't buy Big Mac as a gay, coke-snorting murderer. Even in Park City. —DEVIN GORDON

## MARK O'CONNOR



AMERICA'S PREMIER fiddler first recorded as a 12-year-old. Now 41, he's a classical composer, leads a hot-jazz trio and teaches at his summer fiddle camps. On Feb. 4 he has two concerts in New York. The Gloriosa Dei Cantores chorus debuts his Folk Mass, while at Lincoln Center, Wynton Marsalis and Jane Monheit will supplement his Hot Swing Trio. How did he find time to talk with NEWSWEEK's Malcolm Jones?

**As a Nashville session man, you play on more than 400 albums. Do you still listen to country radio?**

I never did. I thought I could be a better, more mature musician by playing on different people's albums—contemporary Christian, James Taylor, Leon Redbone. I loved it all.

**American composers have tried for a long time, with limited success, to fuse classical music with folk or jazz. What makes you think you can do it?**

I've spent a career developing a way to play music that lends itself to the Americana landscape. When I play folk, you hear classical elements. When I play classical, you hear elements of folk—the traditions, the accents, the directness of American life.

**Are more kids picking up musical instruments?**

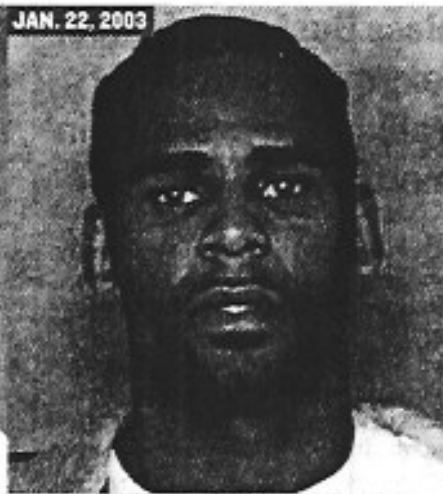
There's less music in the schools, but there are more parents who care about music. When I started to play fiddle, I was one of the few kids who did. People at fiddle contests would tell my parents, "This is important that Mark is doing this—he's going to save fiddling." Now kids everywhere play fiddle music.

**Your Folk Mass was inspired by the events of September 11?**

Yes. I wrote it to heal my own thoughts about the world and what we were all living through. I didn't write it to console anyone else, but I decided that if it could make anyone else feel better, then that made it worthwhile.

**If you had to choose playing or composing, which would it be?**

Either chop off my hands or sever my creativity? I think I'd lose the will to live if I lost my creativity.



**WE BELIEVE WE CAN SKIP IT** Last week R&B singer R. Kelly was arrested, again, on child-porn charges—21 counts this time. A Chicago TV station, apparently hoping to get points—maybe even an interview—decided not to air last year's pictures of Kelly in his jailbird-orange jumpsuit, and not to specify the age of the girl with whom he was allegedly filmed allegedly having alleged sex. (Yes, we lawyered this.) Here's the picture; the alleged girl was allegedly 14. Some other time for the interview.

LOOKING FOR TOP LEFT: VISA; WIREIMAGE; JAMES LENNER JR. / RAM; SAGE CORRECTING: WY. CHRIS O'NEAR-87

# The New York Times

Copyright © 2003 The New York Times

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2003



Hiroaki Ito for The New York Times

Elizabeth C. Patterson conducting *Gloriae Dei Cantores* from the Community of Jesus in Orleans, Mass., at St. Thomas Church.

## MUSIC REVIEW

### *Wandering in a Wilderness Of Old Testament Passages*

By ANNE MIDGETTE

It's a happy thing when a chorus devotes virtually its whole New York concert to works by living composers. And *Gloriae Dei Cantores*, a chorus from the Community of Jesus in Orleans, Mass., upped the ante by commissioning a major new work by Mark O'Connor, "Folk Mass," which had its world premiere at St. Thomas Church on Tuesday night.

You had to applaud the effort and the fine chorus. Unfortunately, effort was palpably in evidence.

It was an effort just to sit through Mr. O'Connor's 50-minute opus. The music chugged its way through huge chunks of Old Testament text, creating a sprawling behemoth with no discernible form, served up at an unvarying emotional and dynamic temperature. Conceived as a response to 9/11, the piece was ambigu-

ous in its message, and any fragments of folklike melody were too firmly embedded in the concretelike conglomerate of the whole to be extracted with any pleasure.

And for all the valiant work of the singers and soloists, led by the chorus's director, Elizabeth C. Patterson, it had to be an effort to sing the thing. Even the very good tenor soloist, Brother Richard Cragg, was flagging slightly by the end.

By contrast, the second half of the program featured some well-wrought music by able craftsmen, like Conrad Susa's lovely "The God of Love my Shepherd Is." In "Rex Glorae," William Mathias managed to do what Mr. O'Connor could not: write a piece in several sections with different, contrasting moods. The evening closed with a beautiful Gregorian chant that helped wash away the aftertaste of the first half of the concert.