



ELEKTRA

WOMEN'S CHOIR

creating • exploring • celebrating

Elektra's mandate is to inspire and lead in the choral art form through excellence in performance and through the creation, exploration, and celebration of women's repertoire.

Tapestry International Celebration of Women's Choirs 2018

Listener's Guide

by Morna Edmundson, Artistic Director

<http://elektra.ca/concerts-events/tapestry-international-celebration-of-womens-choirs/>

Choral Threads Concert

Friday, May 4, 2018 7:30pm

St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church, 1490 Nanton Ave at Granville, Vancouver

FREE CONCERT

Celebration Concert

Saturday, May 5, 2018 7:30pm

Christ Church Cathedral, 690 Burrard Street at Georgia, Vancouver

TICKETED CONCERT

Performers:

Elektra Women's Choir

Morna Edmundson, Artistic Director

Stephen Smith, piano

and the 12 singers of Elektra's Mira Youth Mentorship Program

with guest ensembles

Frisches Ei, Mariko Miura, Artistic Director (Kyoto, Japan)

Gardabaer Women's Choir, Ingibjörg Guðjónsdóttir, Artistic Director (Gardabaer, Iceland)

VOX Femina Los Angeles, Iris Levine, Artistic Director

Welcome! This "Listener's Guide" is meant to give you insight into Elektra's season programming and to make the concert experience richer and more meaningful. Today I'm sharing the context for our May 4 and 5 concerts, the culmination of our Tapestry International Celebration of Women's Choirs 2018.

Every three years, Elektra posts a call for women's choirs who are interested in come to Vancouver to meet, rehearse, perform separately and as a massed choir, share, and learn. We not only ask for recordings and sample repertoire, but we ask the choirs why Tapestry International is of interest to

them. We're looking for collaborators who are not only good choirs, but who share our interest in experiencing the diversity of adult women's choral singing around the world.

This year's group is the most geographically and culturally diverse that we've ever had. We're absolutely thrilled to welcome Frisches Ei from Kyoto, Gardabaer Women's Choir from Iceland, and VOX Femina Los Angeles. Descriptions of all the choirs and biographies of their conductors can be found in the Concert Program pdf, also available from the Elektra website Tapestry International page. The complete repertoire for both concerts is also found in that document.

Our time together starts on Wednesday night, May 2 when we gather for a Welcome Dinner. After a greeting from the Squamish First Nation's Rebecca Duncan, we will enjoy a meal and sing a piece of two for each other. The next day, rehearsals start on four pieces of music that we will all perform as one large, massed choir of 140 voices at the Celebration Concert on Saturday night, May 5.

To set the program for the massed choir, about six months ago I asked each of the three guest conductors to suggest several pieces of music that could represent their culture and singing tradition. We would each order the music in advance and learn it on our own, coming together for four rehearsals in Vancouver. From the suggested works, I chose a set that I felt made a good, varied program of four works: one each from Canada, Japan, Iceland, and the United States. This year, language was a consideration, and I knew it would take work for each of us to learn at home to sing in Icelandic, Japanese, and English.

For the Canadian representative, I chose Canadian composer Jeffrey Enns' *Da Pacem*, a work in Latin (universally comfortable for choirs around the world) with just one line of text: *Give peace in our time, O Lord. Amen.* This is a beautiful, a *cappella* setting, opening and closing with a chant, and I know it will sound amazing with 140 voices together.

Next, from Japan, we have *Yuuyake* ("Sunset") by composer Takatomi Nobunaga, on a text by Toshiko Takada. The music of this original composition reflects the relaxed beauty of a sunset. The famous Japanese children's nursery rhyme *Yuuyake koyake* is woven into the piano accompaniment. This is a prayer for a quiet mind resonating with the peaceful sunset. Those listeners who are not able to attend the Saturday night concert will be able to hear this piece sung just by Frisches Ei on the Friday night.

Third is *Spinna Minni* ("Spinning Memories") by Icelandic composer Mist Þorkeldsdóttir on a text by Þórarinn Eldjárn. The lyrics of this song are based on the traditional *Völuspá* (*Prophecy of the Völva*), the oldest of Nordic poems. *Völuspá* is a part of the *Prose Edda*, which contains poems about the world's creation, and its end in Ragnarrök. According to Nordic mythology, the Three Witches (*skaparnir*) live under the Tree of Life (*Yggdrasil*) and determine human destiny. They spin the threads of destiny for every person born on the planet, thus determining their whole course of life.

The closing piece of Saturday's Celebration Concert is *One with the Wind* by David O, text by Larissa FastHorse and David O. The Lakota text reflects the struggle of one woman—her fight to survive and to be accepted. In the Lakota way, identity is formed in relationship to others. We witness the interaction with the woman's immediate family, her distant family, and ultimately, her entire community. Not one voice stands alone in *One with the Wind*, and not one woman stands alone in our community.

By the time you see us on stage as a choir of 140 voices, we'll have performed considerably more repertoire from our own countries for each other and the public. Sharing repertoire, particularly in a growing subgenre of choral music which is women's choirs, is hugely important to us conductors. I know I will go away with new ideas for programming and presentation by hearing and watching our guest choirs.

Another thing that we'll experience is the dynamic - the ecology - of each of these four distinct choirs. My daughter, Julie Edmundson, who sings in Elektra, has just finished third year of a four-year degree program in Recreation Therapy. When her research methods class required her to design and deliver study and analyze its results, she chose the theme of wellness and women's choral singing. Her study looked at whether participation in a women's-only choir had any positive impact on an individual's social connectedness, mental wellbeing and sense of empowerment. The study is not published, but her teacher is encouraging her to do so, because the results strongly point to an affordable and widely-accessible way for Recreation Therapists to improve the lives of the women under their care - find them a women's choir! Here are just a few quotes from her report:

[Study participants all currently sing in a women's choir. One commented,] "[I] enjoy the camaraderie and have made some amazing friends who I get to see every week. We share something that few other people understand through our experience singing together" and "while originally I began singing in a women's choir for reasons unrelated to community, I have since developed an amazing, supportive, loving community of strong women that I feel so grateful to be a part of." The music or musical experiences have kept women singing, through the "opportunity to express creativity," and "the repertoire continues to be interesting," and that they have "...grown musically through my years in the choir. Choral activity helps with confidence." The connection they felt between women was discussed, "I love...being part of a group of diverse women. Meeting women of all ages, stages of life, careers, interests, philosophies," and "these women have become my family, and some of my most important relationships." They felt personal love towards an aspect of the choir, saying, "it has become part of who I am. I can't imagine my life without it," and (21), they find that the choir benefits their brain wellness, by stating that, "concentrated time around ONLY supportive, strong, talented, hilarious women on a weekly basis has vastly improved my expressivity, self-esteem and general quality of life," and "singing is good for keeping brain active. I read music instead of playing Sudoku." The difference between the coding in their Reasons for Joining and their Reasons for Staying implies that women did not always understand every impactful factor or benefit of being in a women's choir until they experienced it for themselves. The reasons for their initial interest were more tangible and concrete, whereas the reasons for them staying were more abstract, feeling and emotion-driven. One participant wrote about her continued involvement in her women's choir:

Love of music, love of incredible women, love of the sense of home and community this choir brings. Therapy - music is a way to release emotions and doing it with other women whom you trust and love and who make you feel safe is so, so cathartic.

Back to Tapestry International 2018, I can't speak to the other conductors' reasoning behind their choices of solo repertoire, but I did ask them to "bring what they do best" and I know they will be representing their own ensemble's culture with music they find compelling.

I can tell you a bit about Elektra's five solo pieces. On Friday night, we're singing three Canadian works to open the concert at St. John's Shaughnessy. We start with *One Voice* by Ruth Moody, who

is a member of the Canadian folk trio, The Wailin' Jennys. We welcome our Tapestry International 2018 guest choirs with the words "This is the sound of all of us... a song for every one of us...". Our second piece that night is Stephen Smith's beautiful *Pity Me Not*, on a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay. This is a work that Elektra commissioned not too many years ago, and I was eager to share the quality of musical writing and sensitivity to exceptional texts that Stephen brings to all his works. The poem draws on images of nature. Daylight must end, flowers fade, and human desire is "hushed too soon". The poet urges the reader not to pity her that these things are true. Pity her only because her heart refuses to grasp what her mind already knows. We close our set with *O-Yo-Yo*, a traditional song from Quebec that has been arranged by Stephen Hatfield. This is a playful story of monks flirting with women. In Québec, "un moine" is not only a monk, but a spinning top, and the brisk rhythmic songs of "merry monks" were also sung by children as they played spinning games.

At the Saturday concert at Christ Church Cathedral downtown, Elektra opens the second half with its two solo pieces. The first is *Let Me Fish Off Cape St. Mary's* by Newfoundland songwriter Otto Kelland and arranged by Diane Loomer. Elektra is traveling to Newfoundland at the end of June, and we wanted to take a song from that part of Canada with us. When Kelland died at age 99 in 2004, his 1947 song evoking the traditional life of a Newfoundland fisher had long been the unofficial anthem of the easternmost province of Canada. The four verses paint a scene of the fisher's desire to return to his boat (called a "dory"), the fish ("caplin"), the tides, and the ocean waves.

The second is the world premiere of a work written for us for the trip to Newfoundland, Alexina Louie's *Rain Makes Its Own Night*, on a poem by Toronto's Poet Laureate, Anne Michaels. Our assignment with this commission funded in part by Choral Canada was to bring a new work that represented water in our part of the world. After thinking about tide pools and the Pacific Ocean, I stumbled on Michael's poem about rain and everything fell into place. Alexina immediately saw the musical possibilities of it, and we are very happy to be sharing it with you in Tapestry International before it heads to St. John's. And, if you are tuned in to the Canadian contemporary music scene, you may know that Louie is one of Canada's most celebrated and frequently-commissioned composers, but she is not usually a choral composer. That was the very reason I asked her to be our composer for this project, and it's been a total pleasure working with her as she has dipped her toe into what a women's choir sounds like and how to write for us. I hope this will not be her last piece for choir!

The poem (used by permission) is by Toronto's Poet Laureate, Anne Michaels.

*Rain makes its own night, long mornings with lamps left on.
...[4 lines not set to music]
The hard rain smells like it comes from the earth.
The human light in our windows, the orange stillness
of rooms seen from outside. The place we fall to alone,
falling to sleep. Surrounded by a forest's green assurance,
the iron gauze of sky and sea,
while night, the rain, pulls itself down through the trees.*

Thank you for reading, for your interest in women's choirs and Elektra in particular. I feel so fortunate to be part of something so positive, affirming, and beautiful. We look forward to welcoming you and our guest choirs to the concerts.

Yours,

Morna Edmundson, Artistic Director
Elektra Women's Choir