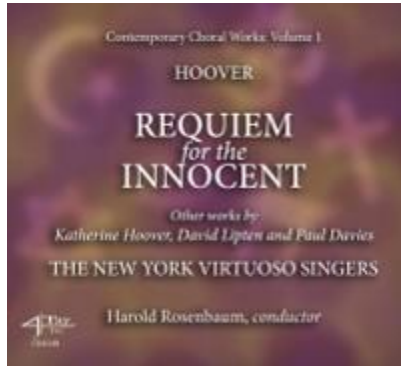


Katherine Hoover and Harold Rosenbaum: Recording Her Unique *Requiem for the Innocent*

By Ronald E. Grames



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When I interviewed flutist, poet, and composer Katherine Hoover for the July/August 2016 issue (*Fanfare* 39:6) I commented that Parnassus records had, with its several releases, touched on every aspect of Hoover's art. I was wrong, as this new CD proves. Hoover is a fine composer of choral music as well, and thanks to a new recording initiative by Harold Rosenbaum and his acclaimed chorus, The New York Virtuoso Singers, we are now able to hear a good sampling of her small but significant body of work for vocal ensemble. That includes a striking setting of poetry by Walt Whitman, in the form of a liturgy for the dead, titled *Requiem for the Innocent*.

The last interview was with Hoover alone, but this time the composer asked that her partner in this project be a partner in the conversation. So we got a three-way email discussion of the music and the recording started even as the audio and documentation were in final preparations for publication.

Hoover wrote in her program notes that the *Requiem for the Innocent* was inspired by the attacks of September 11, 2001, but that she withdrew the work as a result of the military campaign against Baghdad in 2003. To start with, I asked her to say a little about her response to both events, and why she decided to pursue a recording of the Requiem, and a performance in concert, 13 years after it was withdrawn.

"I live in Manhattan, about seven miles above the 9/11 site. There was no avoiding the shock and consequences of this, and the first poem I actually had published is called 'Dust' and is about that tragedy. I began the Requiem not long after that. The poetry of Walt Whitman which I used was originally written about the Johnstown flood, which was also entirely human-caused, and killed about the same number as the 9/11 attacks.

“Then, when we began our tremendous bombardment in 2003 of a city whose country had nothing to do with 9/11, using that as some kind of strange excuse, I was appalled. Many, many more innocents were victimized. Morally, I could not mourn the 3,000 when my country was bombing tens of thousands who were just as innocent. So I put it away.

“The first outing of the Requiem was done under Tom Schmidt at St. Peter’s Church at 54th and Lexington Avenue, in the Citicorp Building. That was in November 2002, as part of a yearly Service of Remembrance. It was interspersed, in parts, in an immense church service of well over two hours. There was no continuity. As grateful as I was to the singers, the choir plus a few ringers, and to Tom, a fine musician and a terrific pianist, rehearsal time was very short, a prominent player got lost, and the acoustic was problematic.

“When I looked at it about two years ago, I realized I could dedicate the piece to all of these innocent victims. I think you have the words that I used: ‘I would now like to dedicate the work to the innocent victims of both bombings: the 3000 killed in the U.S., and the tens of thousands of men, women, and children who perished in the explosions and flames in Baghdad during March and April, 2003.’”

I asked if there were any revisions from the first version.

“For the recording and the upcoming performance, I have added and revised some material, made edits and adjustments for balance, and renamed the work. Consequently, the upcoming performance in Trinity Church on World Peace Day, September 21, 2016, will be the premiere.”

Meanwhile, Harold Rosenbaum, who will conduct this premiere, was waiting in the wings. I asked if he had come to the process before or after the decision to resurrect the work. “I come into the picture after that point,” he responded. “I recently formed, along with 4Tay Records and Adam Abeshouse, the superb recording engineer, a recording company called Virtuoso Choral Recordings. Katherine saw one of my advertisements and contacted me.”

Was this then the first contact between them? “No,” he answered, “back in the 1970s I performed her *Four English Songs*, utterly delightful pieces, in a Women Composers’ Concert.”

“Harold never forgot those pieces!” Hoover continued. “I would see him at a concert and he would mention them, even years later. I went to hear his groups from time to time—a mesmerizing evening of the Bach Motets—and taking friends to his interesting and varied Christmas concerts. We never completely lost touch, though I was totally involved in instrumental chamber and orchestral music most of that time.”

“A few years ago, Katherine traveled with me to Italy to sing Verdi’s Requiem,” Rosenbaum added.

“I had played the Verdi many times, and I have always loved the work,” she said, picking up the story. “About three years ago I had to leave the flute, and I was missing active music-making. I wanted to see Italy—which was beautiful beyond my imagining—and had discovered a late-in-life ability to sing. It was a grand trip.”

Working on this recording, then, was a partnership of friends. Did things go as well as that suggests it should have?

Rosenbaum answered first. “The process was simple and smooth. Katherine wanted her works recorded, and I had just established Virtuoso Choral Recordings (virtuosochoralrecordings.com) for just this sort of project. My advertisements for this venture state that no project is too big or too small. I work with both choral and instrumental contractors—and have for decades—who can supply me with any number of performers required. I spread my energies in many different directions. I have support systems everywhere on which I rely to make my ventures easier for me. Preserving the works of composers is essential and is very fulfilling for me.”

Hoover was pleased with the results. “I am still blown away by the amazing abilities of The New York Virtuoso Singers. Even while sight reading, they listen and blend and work together. Their enthusiasm for my work was a gift that I treasure. The instrumentalists were also excellent and enthusiastic.

“Harold can grasp a difficult new score, particularly—but certainly not only—a choral score, extremely quickly, and he knows how to use rehearsal time with the utmost efficiency. He’s respectful of both composers and performers, and establishes a wonderful sense of working together for a rewarding end. What’s a composer not to like?!”

Rosenbaum was quick to praise, as well. “Katherine’s music is quite beautiful and moving. As a flutist/composer, she understands the lyrical component, and thus knows how to write for the voice. Every moment of her music is vibrant, interesting, captivating, and inspired. The word ‘organic’ comes to mind, and she is a natural. What I mean is that with her superb ear, her instincts, her knowledge, her teamwork mentality, her ability to communicate exactly what she wants at all times whether in the printed score, in the rehearsals, during recordings, and in the editing studio, she earns the respect and admiration of all who work with her.”

“I was at all rehearsals and recording sessions.” Hoover added. “I am extremely gratified by the outcome, and truly thankful to Harold and all the performers.”

Harold Rosenbaum has worked with some of the biggest-name choral composers around. When his choir celebrated its 25th anniversary a few years ago, he was able to commission 25 compositions, many from the top names in the field. A recording with those works, *25X25*, is available on Soundbrush Records. His is a greatly admired ensemble, and given a chance, he is pleased to talk about its history and accomplishments and his work to build it.

“For years, I was the choirmaster of the Brooklyn Philharmonic under Lukas Foss. Although it was a bit unusual—unheard of?—to be a choirmaster of a New York City orchestra—it still is—I suppose it was because the BPO called upon me and my all-volunteer Canticum Novum Singers over 20 times to perform with them over the years. In 1987, I was asked by Lukas to conduct the American premiere of Hans Werner Henze’s *Orpheus Behind the Wire* on its *Meet the Modern* series at Cooper Union, with an all-professional ensemble, assembled for that occasion, called the Brooklyn Philharmonic Singers. I contracted the singers myself, having gotten to know dozens of them over the first 15 years of my career when adding them as singers to Canticum

Novum Singers and as soloists for the many performances of Handel oratorios, Bach Passions and Masses, plus premieres by Handel, J. C. Bach, Fauré, Bruckner, Harbison, Berio, Schnittke, Rorem, Schickele, George Benjamin, and dozens of other composers. I spent six months playing through Henze's piece daily before being comfortable enough to begin the rehearsal process. I had never conducted a piece with quite that level of difficulty. Alas, the series ceased to exist after that, but the experience convinced me that I had to start a professional choir of my own.

“We began receiving grants after The New York Virtuoso Singers' first performance—an all-Britten program—and subsequent ones received glowing reviews from the New York Times and other major publications. After the Britten concert, I scheduled programs which presented favorite choral works that I wanted to hear done by a professional choir. I was still devoted to my first group, The Canticum Novum Singers. It was in top form, gave me immense pleasure—which it still does—and also regularly received glowing reviews. The New York Virtuoso Singers simply gave me more options and opportunities.

“Over the years I started doing more and more contemporary music with NYVS, until it became the focus and primary mission of the choir. Seven years after NYVS was formed, when orchestras started asking us to supply them with as many as 120 singers for concerts, I turned the hiring process over to a brilliant contractor, Nancy Wertsch, who also was one of my core singers.

“NYVS has sung well over 400 premiere performances. These days I am focusing on commissioning and performing the works of living American composers with them. We are grateful to all our government and individual supporters who help me continue to make music with the three choirs in my organization—our youth choir is the third, rehearsed weekly by my wife Edie—and to the ASCAP Foundation, which allows me to commission 10 Morton Gould/ASCAP Young Composer Award recipients yearly. I have commissioned 84 composers thus far, and I plan on commissioning 10 more per season.”

One of the more striking features of Hoover's Requiem setting is in its use of the form and of parts of the text. Often she sets no more than the opening words of selected sections of the centuries-old liturgy. The primary focus is on two poems by Walt Whitman: “A Voice from Death,” the one inspired by the carnage of the Johnstown flood, and a section of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,” Whitman's eulogy to Abraham Lincoln so famously set by Paul Hindemith. I was intrigued by this and asked her about some of these choices, including why she had chosen to use the form of the Requiem when this was not a Mass, as such, and she was using only small parts of the text.

“I had the distinct impression that Requiem had become a general title for works dedicated to the dead, but because of your question I looked it up. Indeed it has, and the first composers to take liberties with the title, words, and forms were in the 1600s. I knew that both Brahms and Fauré had used their own languages, and Brahms certainly used his own words. I knew a bit about Latin from having both played and sung the Verdi, and also from four years (!) of high school Latin.”

While it is true that Brahms and Fauré used the Requiem format differently than, say, Verdi or Berlioz, Fauré used much of the liturgy, even while excising most of the *Dies irae* and making some other changes. Brahms makes no pretense of using the Requiem form, using other texts from the Bible to achieve a similar effect to Fauré. Hindemith used the word Requiem only in his subtitle, and sets only the secular Whitman. And Whitman himself, despite references to a divine being, was much more spiritual than religious.

I wanted very much to know what she was striving for in the particular—and in my experience, unique—use of sacred and secular in the design of her Requiem. It was a harder question to ask than I had appreciated. The work hints at the liturgy, while using only a little of its imagery—though quite effectively when it does—and hints at a deity, when that doesn't play into the apparent purpose of the work. That intrigued me. Brahms and Fauré removed much of the language of judgment to make their Requiems more consoling. She includes some of the *Dies irae*, even translating it to make the image more threatening. On whom does the judgement fall? Is that the intent?

First she clarified a point from our earlier conversation. “I would say that *my* beliefs are more spiritual than specifically religious, as well.

“I find,” she continued, “that many people, of religious or non-religious bent, are interested in the common aspects of various religions. These days, ministers and priests are very likely to quote from holy books or texts that are not of their own religion, but that adhere to many of the same principles or beliefs. Buddhist quotes and wise words from the Dalai Lama are common; homilies from Jewish or Muslim traditions are easy to find. As you will see, the album cover also reflects this effort to make the Requiem resonate with those of many faiths.

“The ‘Day of Anger, of Destruction’ section reflects those hideous days of destruction, such as 9/11 and the bombing of Baghdad, which caused the death of so many innocent people. The judgment, in my opinion, falls on those who wantonly unleash such devastation on others.”

Hoover's responses to questions regarding other features of the work were similarly pragmatic and to the point. In response to an inquiry about her use of spoken delivery for a sizeable amount of the text, she explained, “Being as fond of words as I am, I decided to use two spoken voices so Whitman's trenchant words could be understood.” To the setting of both the Latin and of a translation of the same into English, she stated, “When I realized that the rhythm of ‘Dies irae’ would be the same as ‘day of anger’ I worked at finding other translations that had the same rhythm, and used both languages.”

Both features prove effective, so enough said.

Hoover's music is more technically challenging than many choral works one hears. My first response to hearing *The Last Invocation* was that it was so multi-tonal that it was essentially atonal at times. Each of the five shorter works, as well as the *Requiem for the Innocent*, are handsomely crafted, but all present technical challenges that I would think daunting to many choirs. I asked both to comment on this.

Hoover went first: “Two of them are indeed difficult; *Echo* is not really so hard, *Prayer in Time of War* is approachable, and *Peace is the Way* is actually quite deliberately simple. *The Last Invocation* and *Blow Thou Winter Wind* were beyond the capabilities of any chorus I had access to. I wrote them a long time ago, by way of experimenting, since I had no real way to hear them at that time. I didn’t know if I ever would. I’d say they were a product of my obsession with words, and how those words would interact with varied musical sounds. I’m glad I kept them, for as this project continued, I saw it an opportunity to hear them.

“By the way,” she corrected, “I would say that *The Last Invocation* is often poly-tonal, rather than atonal.”

“Yes,” Rosenbaum agreed, “some of this music is more challenging than most of the choral music being performed these days. But there is a lot of music being written and performed that is quite a bit harder.

“I have always been attracted to complex music. It was while studying and then conducting *Orpheus Behind the Wire* that I got bitten by the bug. The challenge was simply extraordinarily satisfying to me in a way that was completely different than, say, Bach’s Mass in B Minor, which in my opinion is the greatest choral work ever written, and which certainly takes as much study each time I conduct it. It’s just the way I am wired. When I hear complex compositions, I am more alive musically—sort of electrically charged— than when I hear other music. It can be equally satisfying, of course, but in different ways.

“The focus on extremely complex music naturally narrows the field of singers, even professional ones that Nancy accepts after a comprehensive audition. Thus, in essence, the sound of the group is somewhat determined by the collective sound of the 16 extraordinary musicians who sing each concert we produce, and that I conduct. However, Nancy looks over all the music for each concert before deciding who would be the most suitable 16 singers for the repertoire on hand. Remarkably, the rosters have virtually never been 100 percent the same from concert to concert; some of our core singers are sometimes not available. However, the bench is still pretty deep and there are always equally gifted alternatives.”

What about choral sound?

“I am not as interested in producing the pure, non-vibrato sound that many great choirs in the world have, as beautiful as it is, as in having a wide range of color and dynamic range. My singers blend beautifully in their own way, but have the power to sing Poulenc’s *Figure humaine*, Schoenberg’s *Friede auf Erden*, and Beethoven’s *Missa solennis* with a chilling and extraordinary effect.”

And I had to ask, given the fact that Hoover and I discussed her absolute pitch in the earlier interview: Is absolute pitch a requirement for participation in his choir?

“Absolute pitch is not required for participation in my choir. But a choir of 16 people, all without absolute pitch, would have a very difficult time learning as much contemporary music as we do in each concert within the rehearsal time limitations. In a typical assemblage of my singers—and

keep in mind that we almost never have the same 16 from one concert to another—half of them, more-or-less, have absolute pitch. This really helps the others. Some, by the way, who say they don't, really do.”

Besides focusing on contemporary scores, are there any other ways that you have specialized?

“I like to think that I specialize in the totality of the choral art. But receiving unpublished choral scores from over 11,000 American composers has inspired me to help their much deserved cause. I also like looking forward rather than backward, and I have a need to explore new territories and to keep challenging myself. This fits in perfectly with my mission to spread great new music to the public.”

This mission is the reason for his new venture, Virtuoso Choral Recordings, of which this CD is the first release. The title is straightforward: *Virtuoso Choral Recordings, Volume 1: Works by Hoover, Davies and Lipten*. It includes six works by Hoover, plus short works by two other American composers: an *Ave Maria* by Paul Davies, and two secular works by David Lipten. Both are new to me, though I see that Lipten has received positive notice in *Fanfare* 36:3. I asked Rosenbaum how he chooses what he records for the label, and how he put this release together.

“I was fortunate to be contacted by three amazing composers, at around the same time, each of whom wanted their works recorded. It was that simple.”

I assumed that they had been chosen because they complemented the Hoover works and made such a nice program.

“No,” he admitted, “I cannot claim that to be true. The only screening process, in a sense, was that the music added up enough to fill one CD, that they all wanted to make it happen quickly, and that we were available.”

I said that I thought then that this was a remarkably lucky start. “Yes,” he agreed, “it is a very nice start. It was very fortuitous. We try to make everything sound really, really good whether they are level A or level C quality works. Here we had definite A level.”

I have no skin in the game, but I was a bit surprised that he would agree to record anything that came his way, excellent, as here, and not so excellent. I would have imagined that a choir with the reputation of The New York Virtuoso Singers would want to be careful to protect it.

“I don't think there is much chance of our tainting our reputation by recording music that some listeners may not take to. It is impossible to predict if even highly regarded, award-winning pieces will move the listener, or if music I personally don't enjoy will. I've produced over 100 concerts with The New York Virtuoso Singers for which I have chosen the music. We have been fortunate to receive consistently glowing reviews for CDs with great music on them, therefore I'm not that concerned about the level of music in this project. Over the years, various composers have approached me with funding and wanted to record tracks on composite CDs, and we have recorded it. So, we do both.”

So this really is not any different than what he has done in the past? “No, not really.” Just more formalized? “Exactly.”

“And there is so much talent out there,” Rosenbaum added, giving me several examples of exceptional music he has found in unexpected places.

If my years as a critic have taught me anything, it is that there are many talented people out there writing music and then trying to scrape together enough money to get a couple of recordings made so people can hear it.

“That’s exactly why we started our company,” he agreed. “And now we’ve come up with another idea. It’s a sub-group, a subsidiary, called Virtuoso Chamber Choir Recordings, where there is just one singer on a part. So that is another option that people can choose, and it is much less expensive. And, if we have 20 minutes of music by one composer or more, and they want one singer on a part, we can rehearse on one day, and the very next day go into the recording studio for four hours. In some cases I can then sit with the engineer, and after the final edits are made, we can give the composer the master file right there on a memory stick. It’s just amazing.”

So it is; it is sort of an instant professional recording. Still, I expressed hope that he was going to continue to raise funds and record works that he specifically chooses to make available. And obviously, that he was still going to continue to perform live concerts.

“Oh, absolutely!” he assured me. “This project incorporates three elements: my organization, Adam Abeshouse Productions—the recording engineer and his team—and 4Tay Records, which is owned by Jeffrey James, who has been my publicist for many years. I have not made any records for 4Tay before. I *have* recorded on about 10 other labels and that is not going to change.”

I wanted to get back to Katherine Hoover’s music as we brought the interview to a close, and clean up a few loose ends that I hoped to explore. She had mentioned that *The Last Invocation* and *Blow Thou Winter Wind*, which were written in the 1980s and 90s, were experiments. What was there about those words—Whitman, again, and Shakespeare—that particularly appealed to her? Her Rossetti setting, *Echo*, comes from about the same experimental time as the Shakespeare setting, while the other two, *Prayer in Time of War*—an exception to her general rule of not setting her own verse—and *Peace is the Way* were written in the difficult year 2003 when she withdrew the Requiem. What did she want to say about them?

“A most important aspect was that the words were simple and clear, and could, in general, be heard and understood, even when sung. As I have mentioned before, that is a bit of an obsession with me. *The Last Invocation* also speaks of death, as does *Echo*, and they were written at the time of a loss that haunted my poetry of the time. The Shakespeare will resonate, I think, with anyone who has spent a major part of their lives writing or composing. The *Prayer in Time of War* and *Peace is the Way* were written in the first few days of the bombing of Baghdad. The latter was written on a bus returning from the country, totally unlike my usual time-consuming composition habits.”

I noted, in closing, that Hoover and Rosenbaum prepared and recorded the Requiem first, and now are going to present it in public. What was the story?

“As you know,” Rosenbaum explained, “Katherine approached me first to record it. I fell in love with it and promised myself and her that I would perform it. Often, concert themes develop around a particular striking piece. Being that the text of her Requiem uses writings about peace more than the traditional liturgical text, I gathered other pieces together with similar messages and decided to perform the concert on the annual International Day of Peace, September 21, and in the church, Trinity Wall Street, where that message is particularly poignant, being directly and severely affected by the September 11 tragedy.”

The concert is in the future as I write. I suspect that it will be as successful as the project recording is. I hope some readers get a chance to hear it live. For the many readers who won't, there is this recording, first fruits of an interesting recording project, for them to explore.