1st IFCM International Competition for Choral Composition

Notes from the Jury

By Graham Lack, Jury President

We live in a technological age. Despite being located in the four corners of the world, the members of a jury can today discuss, liaise, view musical works on remote sites, make comments, and be informed of progress as a competition takes its course. There is one proviso: the technical IT tools exist and function as intended. Happily this was the case with the 1st International Competition for Choral Composition run under the auspices of the IFCM in cooperation with Europa Cantat and Jeunesses Musicales International, the results of which were recently announced. But more about things technological in a moment…

Faced with the task of examining some 65 scores, the jury decided early on to sift through the pile in an attempt to reduce it to a manageable amount. We thus arrived at 13 strong pieces that we wished to look at in more detail, those works which we discarded having been considered either somewhat immature, strangely unidiomatic, or simply too hard to sing considering the scant musical results. Certainly, the jurors benefitted from internal advice not to get too immersed in detail, but to keep in mind the overall musical picture when reading through each score.

Having arrived at our short list – and relying largely on our

professional experience and emotional reaction to the music – it soon became necessary to judge each piece using more technical criteria. In what emerged as a kind of second round, these included harmonic sense, melodic invention, rhythmic interest, musical form, word setting and a number of other factors. Perhaps because the theme of "peace" had been chosen, we found ourselves dealing with many chorale-type works, slow-moving pieces which bore some degree of internal similarity to each other. This explains a slight skew in our discussions towards harmonic implications of the music itself. That gainsaid, there soon emerged from our baker's dozen a much smaller number of compositions that were turning into more obvious candidates for a prize.

A note at this stage on the use and abuse of technology: it is of course easy to carp about less strong pieces of music, but we felt nonetheless that an overreliance on the piano and composing at an electronic keyboard might explain the weaknesses in many an entry to the competition. We hope composers will take note of this, and try to hone their aural skills by using – heaven forbid – a pencil and some paper, perhaps taking off into the woods for a meditative moment. The other issue that raised its ugly head was that of tessitura: we were quite frankly astonished by many a soprano passage in the stratosphere and equally by the altos singing in their boots. Vocal ranges, which are admittedly not quite the same as tessitura, are pretty well established in 4 or 5-part *a cappella* texture and should surely be seen as straightforward stuff capable of being learned.

But back to what were to be the winners. During the final conference, conducted by Skype and which linked up Australia, Finland, Italy, Germany and Great Britain, it was salutary to note that the jury practiced consensus thinking and cast a unanimous vote for *White Those That Stayed Still* by Matthew van Brink. This was our outright winner. The opening "game" of fifths bodes well indeed, and is continued with a rhetorical

question – the use and denotation of fourths within this context. This is an enigmatic work, and we were careful not to skim over it. The jury was increasingly surprised by the harmonic subtleties and unusual implications of what is at first sight a Baroque chain of fifths and fourths. We soon agreed this was a composer with a very unusual ear. The harmonies are still keeping us guessing.

We decided to award two works a Highly Commended: Tom Harrold's *At That Hour* (for harmonic originality) and *Drawing Number One* (for a work as a musical landscape) by Michael Fili. Finally, we were left with a piece that certainly had something original and unusual (where East meets West it turned out) but which we felt did not fit these categories, hence my wish to mention it here: the piece is by a Korean composer, Ji Young Kim, her *Reflection on "Waiting for Mama"*.

The outright winner will soon be published by Earthsongs and premiered by the World Youth Choir. The three other works, above, are to be issued by Hayo Music this July. All in all an exciting event. It was a privilege to work with such experienced jurors and I hope my advice was seen as of the gentle kind. I, too, learned much. Congratulations to the winners!