

# VOX Femina Celebrates 20 Years with “Women On The Rise”

By Jeff Slayton - June 12, 2017

[Vox Femina Los Angeles](#) celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Season with a stunning performance at the [Herbert Zipper Concert Hall](#), located in the [Colburn School](#). Regarding the performance space, the Southwest Chamber Music has been quoted saying “Zipper Hall is acoustically one of the best performance spaces in Los Angeles”. This statement became evident as every word sung and each note played during this performance arrived at one’s ears with crystal clarity.

Dr. Iris S. Levine is the Artistic Director and Choral Director of Vox Femina Los Angeles. With her leadership, the group has become one of country’s finest women’s choruses and *Women On The Rise* highlighted works that demonstrated her vision of the company’s future. The evening included a wide range of music and lyrics composed primarily by women, plus the premiere of *Fire Within* choreographed by [Sarah Swenson](#). Also featured were the talents of pianist Lisa Edwards.



Each section of the program had a separate topic with varying numbers of songs to represent each subject. The first was called *When Fire Took our Shape* with songs *Fire Within* and *At the heart of our stillness*. Having dance performed to live music is always a plus. Add in the sound of 38 amazing voices and you have the potential for an incredible experience. This was true for Sarah Swenson’s beautiful and elegant new dance, also titled *Fire Within*. Performed with great

skill and clarity by members of [Vox Dance Theatre](#), Cheryl Banks-Smith, Tamsin Carlson and Grace Privett-Mendoza, *Fire Within* was a quietly stunning work for three women whose ages spanned three generations. Wearing lovely floor-length gowns of gold, yellow and silver, the women demonstrated solidarity by periodically coming together in unified tableaux. When they danced separately, each commanded the stage with their individual strengths developed through varying years of experience. It was wonderful to see three generations performing onstage together to reflect how each generation learns from and becomes stronger due to the paths carved out by their elders. Swenson's movement was lyrical, yet grounded; strong, while bending to vulnerability. The only criticism is that the dance was over far too quickly. A wonderful problem to have.

The music credits for *Fire Within* were listed as Marytha Paffrath / Dakota Butterfield / Traditional arranged by C. Wilson. *At the heart of the matter* was by Kathleen Allan. Together these works were, at times, haunting with voices rising up to fill the hall, only to soften into sounds of a gentle breeze whispering past one's ear.

*Speak Up and Speak Out* involved four songs. The strongest of these was *Truth* by Andrea Ramsey because of its poignant message that truth is all we have. The lyrics were driven home via the percussion rhythms performed by Nick Stone. *Kindness* composed by Christina Whitten Thomas with lyrics by poet/songwriter Naomi Shihab Nye added a touch of wisdom and ease. *I Have a Voice* by Los Angeles composer Moira Smiley incorporated accents of exhaling breath, clapping, foot stomping and hand/body rhythms to become a visual treat and audible pleasure. *William Tell Mom Song* (with apologies to Rossini) was a humorous and fast paced song to Gioachino Rossini's *William Tell Overture* that pointed out the difficulties mothers face being the ones who bear the burden of raising their young.

*Soaring* featured the vivid and stirring *Flight* composed by Jocelyn Hagen, with texts by Janet Windeler Ryan (*Sky Song*) and Julia Klatt Singer (*Come Spring* and *This Sky Falls*). During a pre-performance discussion, Hagen spoke to how once she had chosen the poems or text, that the music came easily. Her choice of musical instruments was guided by the meaning behind the text. Here she composed using flute (Lisa Edelstein), Cello (Leah Metzler) and percussion (Nick Stone). The combination of these instruments with the Vox Femina voices conjured up a sense of open spaces or mid-west prairies while the text evoked a sense of flight and moving forward.

Desiree Balfour, who had a brief solo in *Flight*, was recently named Assistant Conductor for Vox Femina Los Angeles. Here she skillfully conducted *Lux Aeterna* composed by Michelle Roueché. *Lux Aeterna* is Latin for "eternal light" and may be referred to as what is sung or recited during communion in the Roman Catholic Church. There was a definite religious or spiritual sense to this work enhanced by the structure of the vocals. During one section, the 38 voices sounded like many times that number, saying different but similar words all at once before returning to a peaceful harmony.

Levine returned to the podium to conduct the final section titled *Stronger Together* featuring *Rise Up* by Jake Runestad, *Sister* by Cris Williamson, arranged by S. Halleman, and *Still I Rise* by Rosephanye Powell. *Rise Up* was a powerful cry of protest or call to action. *Sister* was a song of sisterhood and support for one another and *Still I Rise* was a high energy song performed in style

of southern church gospels. The latter feature the wonderful voices of Helen Mendoza and Allie Fukushima.

This was my first time attending a Vox Femina Los Angeles concert, but I intend to return for more. Under the expert direction of Dr. Iris S. Levine, the voices are gorgeous, the production is excellent and the performances are top notch. This group is a precious gem in the musical crown of Los Angeles. May they continue for another 20 years.

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