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THE BLOG

A Musical Interpretation of Same Sex Marriage

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For many at this time, the issue of marriage equality is fraught with strife because it has fallen into a cultural cauldron of confusion that has spun out of control. We see images on the nightly news of triumphant same sex couples embracing at courthouses, then raging anti-gay protesters gripping Bible-versed posters. Media coverage of an anti-gay politician turns frenzied when the same anti-gay politician is caught soliciting a man in an airport bathroom. From popular magazines to conservative newspapers, this month's lead stories covered the country western singer who came out, and probed whether United States Supreme Court nominee Elena Kagan dated guys.

It is time to take a break from the politicization and polarization of the issue of marriage equality and ease into a most beautiful celebration of it. And I have the perfect suggestion: go see The Empire City Men's Chorus world premiere of Prothalamia, (a Latin term for songs or odes composed for a wedding) on Sunday, May 23, 2010 at 3 pm at Riverside Church and on May 25, 2010 at Church of St. Ann and the Holy Trinity, 157 Montague Street, Brooklyn Heights for only \$20 to 30 per ticket. See www.empirecitymenschorus.org.

The newly commissioned choral work by award winning American composers Charles Norman Mason and Dorothy Hindman comprises songs and odes exploring marriage equality. Prothalamia is directed by Christopher Clowdus, the Artistic Director of the Empire City Men's Chorus, a native of Alabama, who studied at Yale University, and has conducted members of the Chinese National Opera Orchestra and has performed in St. Paul's Cathedral, Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center.

If you love classical music, if you wish to be taken in by new music which is varied, utterly rich and sung with purpose and heart, you will love Prothalamia. I snuck into a rehearsal of the piece recently and was immediately transformed. I love all music but know nothing about it (other than what I've learned this year helping my son with his high school Music Appreciation class). Watching the Empire City Men's Chorus, I learned that men's choral music is often written for four parts, first and second tenor, baritone, and bass. This is the 17th season for the Chorus, New York City's only predominantly gay men's choir dedicated to the performances of the classical music.

The opera is based on secular poetry and prose concerning marriage, relationships and partnership. Included are texts by the poet Anne Bradstreet,

Gertrude Stein, Walt Whitman and texts from pre-modern Europe and an ancient Gregorian chant.

The work is structured as a Latin Mass, but the texts are secular. The text of the first movement, Kyrie, is a paraphrase from the Grottaferrata Office of Same Sex Union (Pre-Modern Europe). This is a Gregorian Chant-style movement, which is perfect and meaningful in the setting of a church.

The next movement, Gloria, is a story of two women in love, cleverly staged with members of the chorus speaking to each other in conversation, apart from but feeding off of each other.

Credo is next based on an excerpt from Walt Whitman's Song of Myself, 1856. It is the highlight of the work for me, so rich it should become the *It* wedding song for straight and gay people.

Following is Sanctus, with heart wrenching text by Anne Bradstreet.

Finally, there is Agnus Dei, consisting of a text by the Roman writer Marital, Epigrammata 12.42 ca. C.E. 101 which brings us back to reality as we depart the exploration of marriage equality in music. The text speaks for itself:

*The bearded Callistratus married the rugged Afer
Under the same law by which a woman takes a husband.
Torches were carried before him, a bridal veil covered his face,
Nor was the hymn to you, O god of marriage,
omitted
A dowry was even agreed on.
Does this not, Rome, seem
Enough?*

As Agnus Dei brings us back to the reality of today, it hopefully draws people into a meaningful conversation about marriage and what it means to individuals and to society. Because marriage equality has not been reflected upon in music, Prothalamia should expand and deepen the form and substance of the larger national debate with the polemical volume turned down and the atmosphere of appreciation turned up.

More: [Music New York Same-sex Marriage](#)