

Behind Seattle Pro Musica is one energetic director



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Karen P. Thomas, Seattle Pro Musica artistic director, has put her own strong stamp on the organization.

By Michael Upchurch
Seattle Times arts writer

To watch Karen P. Thomas lead Seattle Pro Musica in rehearsal is like witnessing the eruption of some fizzy new form of alternative energy.

First comes the warm-up exercise: whistlings, hissings, deep breaths in and out, trills and ululations like something out of the Luciano Berio songbook.

Then Thomas leads her crew through the opening item on her agenda: a piece from Indonesia that's part of SPM's next program, "Eastern Lights: Music of Asia and the Pacific."

"Luk Luk Lumbu," as the tune is called, doesn't just involve singing but sound effects. The singers give it a try, but Thomas wants something "much more sensuous."

With a smile, she evokes the scene behind the song: "The night is fragrant — and you're in danger." She cautions, "You don't want to sound too Western about it."

Low men's voices move in a percussive undertow, while high soprano notes whoop upward. An eerie echo effect is worked on. Accents — both in language pronunciation and musical emphasis — are tinkered with and corrected. The pace is brisk, the atmosphere purposeful.

And then there's the humor.

"I'm so mean," Thomas turns around to tell me, in clear hearing of the singers. "I make them sing in 12 different languages."

Thomas, a Seattle native, got her musical training at Cornish College of the Arts and the University of Washington, and became Seattle Pro Musica's third artistic director in 1987. She's had by far the longest tenure as its conductor-director (the group was founded in 1972) and has put her own strong stamp on the organization, developing its repertoire in myriad directions and recording seven CDs with it since 1998.

In rehearsal and in performance, you can *feel* her physically infusing her singers with her energy. Along with the laughter, there's a strong sense of discipline — "We'll make that a better thing, won't we?" — and some astonishingly beautiful sound.

Born in 1957, Thomas began her musical studies at age 8 with guitar and piano. She started composing at the same age. Several of her choral works, including her sublime "Lux Lucis," are in SPM's repertoire, and her work — which ranges from chamber pieces to orchestral offerings — has been performed in Europe, Asia and Latin America, as well as across the United States.

Still, it's conducting that forms the heart of her musical experience. She discovered early on that sitting alone in a practice room was not for her: "Once I started conducting, it was a revelation in terms of making music ... to create something as a group. To me, that's the great joy of what I do."

Her main focus in graduate school was orchestral conducting, particularly opera. But after leaving school she gravitated toward choral music.

"The repertoire is so vast," she says. "It's centuries and centuries of music of all different styles, and it's working with languages. That whole combination of poetry and language and music and the human voice to me is just magical."

Thomas sees no inherent conflict between the demands of composing and conducting: "There's never enough time for everything — so in one sense, yes. But in another sense, being active as a performer informs so much of what one does as a composer. It's hard for me to imagine having much creativity if I was doing it in a void, without being a full-time conductor."

SPM's eclectic repertoire, which ranges from early and medieval music through modern and contemporary work, is one thing that, in Thomas' eyes, makes the group distinctive. SPM's eclectic musical character is especially evident in the upcoming "Eastern Lights" concert and in its latest CD release, "Navidad," which draws on Latin American musical history.

The surprises on "Navidad" include "the oldest printed polyphonic work from the Americas" (sung in Quechua) and 17th-century works that blend Spanish, Indian and African influence, plus contemporary works from Venezuela and Brazil.

Where does Thomas find stuff like this?

"It's something that I'm constantly doing," she says, "researching music, finding new pieces, contemplating ideas for concerts."

Choral conferences and symposia are, she adds, a great way to exchange musical ideas. "In a short amount of time, in one space," she says, "you can encounter tremendous things." Relationships are set in motion — and kept going via e-mail: "The Internet is an amazing thing for making international connections."

The language challenges of SPM's repertoire take some special handling, with Thomas seeking out native speakers of the text in question and having them record it for her slowly, so her singers can listen to it and practice it. In cases where she can't track down a native speaker ("finding a Mongolian speaker in Seattle is tricky"), she'll obtain a CD from the music's publisher, performed by native speakers of that language.

What about conducting a composition she's written herself?

"To a certain extent, they're different hats," she says. "I write something and then I have to think about it like a conductor. I'll make changes to what I wrote, not so much from a compositional standpoint but from a practical standpoint that says: 'It's OK for it to stay this way on paper. But for my choir, in this acoustic, at this time, these certain things might make sense to change.' "

Some of Thomas' compositions are so otherworldly and meditative in character that they seem in polar opposition to her conducting persona. Still, she has a game way of preparing her own pieces for performance, SPM member Keith Axelsen says, sometimes jokingly suggesting what she *thinks* the composer may have had in mind.

Her rehearsal method may have its light moments, but her singers can't praise it highly enough. Marilyn Colyar, who used to sing with the Los Angeles Master Chorale and has worked with some world-class conductors, finds Thomas to be "thoughtful, sensitive, wonderfully musical, totally and elegantly clear in her conducting style."

Thomas is straightforward on what it takes to whip a piece into shape. It's important to bring "performance energy" to rehearsals, she says, in order to accomplish as much as possible in a short amount of time. Humor helps the singers "stay engaged and feel good about what they're doing," even while she makes demands on them.

The goal of those demands, she says, is to "create an experience in which every piece in the concert, regardless of what the theme of the concert is, is compelling in its own right and completely fits into that world." Each piece should somehow "inform" the next piece, she emphasizes, "so you get a journey within the concert itself."

"Eastern Lights" promises to be SPM's most unusual journey yet.

CONCERT PREVIEW **'Eastern Lights: Music from Asia and the Pacific'**

Seattle Pro Musica, directed by Karen P. Thomas, 3 p.m. (family concert) and 7:30 p.m. Dec. 5, Town Hall, 1119 Eighth Ave., Seattle, and 3 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Dec. 12, Bastyr University Chapel, 14500 Juanita Drive N.E., Kenmore; \$22-\$32 (206-781-2766 or www.seattlepromusica.org). Note: For 3 p.m. Dec. 5 family concert, children under 13 are admitted free with advance ticket order (\$5 at the door).