

# SONGS IN THE KEY OF LIFE

## UT vocal quintet offers up “the Meaning of Life”

IF CLASSICAL MUSIC IN GENERAL suffers from the perception of elitism, then early music groups suffer more than most from that dreaded label. Even most classical music buffs are not interested, mostly because they don't know much about it and fear two hours of boredom. Give me Puccini, they cry.

Not so, insists Kathryn C Evans, founder and leader of the Dallas Pro Musica, the vocal quintet based at University of Texas at Dallas featuring members Evans, soprano; Mary Medrick, mezzo-soprano; Michael Austin, counter-tenor; Hoyt Neal, tenor; and Michael Borts, bass. On September 9 at UT Dallas' Jonsson Performance Hall, the group will present “The Meaning of Life,” with works from the medieval and Renaissance. Two works, “What is our Life” by Orlando Gibbons (1583-1623) and “What is Life” by Williams Byrd (1543-1623), inspired the theme for the concert — the first taking its text from the well-known poem by Sir Walter Raleigh.

A+C arts writer **Gregory Sullivan Issacs** caught up with Evans by phone to chat about the classics and performance.

**A+C: So, are your concerts boring and elitist?**

KATHRYN EVANS: Hardly. What we are singing was the popular music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Families sat around and sang this music for their own entertainment in the evenings. Although it was not as danceable, this music was sort of the ABBA, well maybe the Four Seasons, of its time. Many of the selections are beautiful and moving. Some are humorous and others are downright naughty.

**What do you mean?**

Well, some of the modern day publishers, aiming at a high school choir cus-

tomers, have cleaned up the lyrics. One of the pieces we will perform on our upcoming concert (September 9, 2011 UT Dallas) is a dialog between two prostitutes, discussing the workday, much like they would if they were waitresses.

**So why, with all that intrigue, has early music fallen out of fashion?**

Actually, its “out of fashion” era is over. Starting with the mid-20th century, early music has had a stunning revival. Audiences are learning about the beauty and wide range of emotions, and comments about life, that the music of this era explored. There is still a lot of fa-la-la-ing, the subjects mostly explore the “what is life” type of questions.

**Did they explore these subjects — grief, humor, love, turmoil — more than we do now?**

Not really, but it was more concentrated. Life was a lot shorter then, so composers didn't have much time to make a point. But that is only a partly humorous observation. A great percentage of women died in childbirth and, even if you survived that risky procedure, few lived into their 50s, male or female. We tend to think about the people who lived in that era as something different than we are now.

**We are... sort of...**

Not in our emotional makeup. All human feelings remain the same today. Evolution doesn't work that quickly. (Laughs) The composer, as today, tries to speak directly with/to the audience. “I was hurt by unrequited love,” they say. Well, so are the folks listening. Love is still a popular subject for, as they say, “screen and stage,” in the modern era.

**For example?**

Our upcoming concert is called “The Meaning of Life.” The opening work is



Left to Right: Scott Borts, Kathryn Evans, Michael Austin, Mary Medrick and Hoyt Neal perform together as Dallas Pro Musica. Their next show is September 9 at UT Dallas.

“What is our Life” by Orlando Gibbons and “What is Life” by Williams Byrd. Both inspired the theme for the concert. Also, both composers lived in the mid-1500, but the text could have been written today, as far as subject matter goes.

**So, what is the Dallas version of an early music group?**

We are a five voice a capella vocal group. I sing soprano. Mary Medrick is our mezzo-soprano, although she sings the first soprano part on occasion. In fact, in some pieces, we change parts on the repeats. Michael Austin is our counter-tenor, Hoyt Neal is our tenor and Michael Borts is our bass. Borts might be familiar to sports fans, since he sings the National Anthem at most of the professional games.

**Do you ever use instruments?**

Not really. The most common instrumental accompaniment of the era was the harpsichord with the bass line played on a Gamba (a cross between a guitar and a cello). While there are lots of harpsichord players around, the instrument is hard to transport and even harder to keep in tune. Gamba players are rare indeed. So, we just sing.

**Music wasn't published back then. Wasn't it mostly hand-copied.? How did the average family get a score?**

You are correct. Music was either hand-copied, printed from a painstakingly hand-carved block print, or printed on the early presses. In fact, to conserve paper and effort, many times all of the parts were printed so as to be set on a table and the singers would gather around. The parts then faced the singer on that particular side.

**Does that create problems for a contemporary ensemble?**

Sure does. Many editions have wrong notes. The problem is not that they are incorrect, anybody can hear a clinker, but figuring out what the correct note should be is the problem. But we do research. The internet is great for finding facsimiles and other earlier publications.

**Most chamber music, in the classical and romantic eras but leading right up to today, was written for the enjoyment of the performers as much as the audience.**

True, but the television has replaced family music making.

*Ticket at [ah.utdallas.edu/tickets](http://ah.utdallas.edu/tickets)*



## FW Symphony Goes Out of the World

Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra is presenting Gustav Holst's cosmic masterpiece “The Planets” as you've never experienced it before. Projected in HD on a giant screen above the stage, the latest images from modern space exploration provide a stunning visual canvas as the orchestra plays Holst's glorious score. Documentary filmmaker Duncan Copp worked directly with NASA for this project, completed just last year for the Houston Symphony. It then played Carnegie Hall to thunderous applause.

The FWSO performance is Saturday, September 24, at 8 p.m. at Bass Performance Hall. Tickets can be purchased online at [www.fwsymphony.org](http://www.fwsymphony.org).

“The Planets, Op. 32,” a seven-movement orchestral suite by the English composer Holst, was written

between 1914-1916. Each movement of the suite is named after a planet of the Solar System and its corresponding astrological character as defined by Holst. With the exception of Earth, which is not observed in astrological practice, all the planets are represented. From its premiere to the present day, the suite has been enduringly popular, influential, widely performed and the subject of numerous recordings.

For the Houston show premiere, filmmaker Copp told Houston Symphony Magazine, “It's a joy to work with a piece of music that I've known since I was a boy. And then to have this fantastic data set; these beautiful, aesthetically pleasing images from amazing parts of our solar system, (but) the pacing and movement of selected images is key in complementing the tempo of the music.”