



Recorded Sound Reviews

All Is Miracle:

The Choral Music of Kyle Pederson

Transept, Timothy J. Campbell, director
Navona Records, 2025

All Is Miracle: The Choral Music of Kyle Pederson is a release from the Sioux Falls, South Dakota-based choral ensemble Transept, directed by Timothy J. Campbell. Transept functions both as a forty-plus-member choir and as a twelve-voice consort of soloists featured throughout the album. Recorded in 2024, the project is devoted entirely to the choral works of Minneapolis-based composer Kyle Pederson and offers a compelling blend of unaccompanied selections and collaboratively accompanied works. Pederson, himself a native of Sioux Falls, brings added resonance to the recording, creating something of an artistic homecoming through this thoughtful partnership between composer and ensemble. He was also commissioned to compose for the 2026 Eastern ACDA Region's Envision conference in Providence, Rhode Island. This album includes new compositions, arrangements of traditional hymn tunes, fresh text settings, and representative works drawn from across the composer's *oeuvre*.

Recorded at the Cathedral of Saint Joseph in Sioux Falls and produced by the Grammy Award-winning team at Soundmirror, Inc., the album boasts seamless and pristine sound quality. The cathedral provides an

ideal acoustic environment, allowing the full spectrum of tonal color to bloom while preserving exceptional textual clarity. Each selection is rendered with transparency and care, and the programming unfolds organically from one piece to the next, resulting in a cohesive and beautifully curated collection of stand-alone octavos. The album contains seventeen individual works, but the centerpiece, *All Is Miracle*, commissioned for Transept, is truly breathtaking. Set to poetry by Charles Anthony Silvestri, the work pairs evocative text with Pederson's signature part-writing. It recalls the polychordal richness and "crunch-chord" sonorities of 1990's choral writing while maintaining Pederson's distinctive harmonic language. Though structurally straightforward, its power lies in the luminous simplicity of its harmonies, supported by a warm and expressive piano underlay.

The opening measures evoke the atmosphere of a cinematic score before the choir enters in hushed reverence. Mezzo-soprano Clara Osowski and soprano Savannah Porter bring warmth and brilliance to the texture without overshadowing the ensemble; instead, they function as an integrated fifth voice within the choral fabric. Collaborative pianist Paul Sanchez, featured prominently throughout the album, lends both weight and tenderness to the work, deepening its emotional impact.

Stars, the first selection to feature the twelve-voice

consort, is an award-winning work composed in 2016. Its seemingly straightforward four-part SATB texture belies the challenges of intricate tuning and shifting compound meters that propel the music forward with quiet intensity. Introspective and expansive, the work invites the listener to contemplate the night sky and meditate on distant light piercing the darkness.

Some of the album's most compelling collaborations appear at its center. *Sanctus*, another commission for Transept, combines the full choir with pianist Paul Sanchez and organist Jared Ostermann. The piece begins in a simple four-part texture before expanding into an eight-part anthem of striking breadth. Piano and organ provide a sustained harmonic foundation while chant-like motives are seamlessly exchanged among the vocal lines. Though concise, the work is a vivid example of the collaborative synergy between keyboards and choir.

Last Words, also positioned near the center of the album, is an ethereal unaccompanied setting drawn from three Gospel accounts of the crucifixion, commonly known as the Seven Last Words. Pederson weaves Latin and English texts together with striking dramatic intent: the English text offers the narrative perspective, while an octet emerging from within the choir sings Christ's words in Latin. This layered approach heightens emotional tension and drives forward a palpable sense of anguish and inevitability. Yet the work resists closure. Rather than concluding with a definitive cadence, Ped-

erson leaves the listener suspended on a delicate, unresolved chord, neither final nor anticipatory, mirroring the weight of the impending crucifixion.

Near the close of the hour-long album is an arrangement of Philipp Nicolai's *Wake, Awake*, titled *O Morning Star*, also commissioned for Transept. The familiar chorale melody is enriched with modern metric shifts and textural variation, making it an effective penultimate selection. It provides a striking contrast to the final track, *God Be with You 'Til We Meet Again*, a heartfelt arrangement composed in honor of Pederson's alma mater, the Augustana Choir in Sioux Falls. Featuring guitarist Jared Waln and soprano soloist Kayleen Sanchez, the piece embodies poignant simplicity and quiet beauty.

Pederson and Campbell have created a sonorous and thoughtfully designed compilation that highlights both the composer's expressive range and Transept's artistic excellence. This significant recording not only showcases a wide cross-section of Pederson's choral writing but also affirms the vitality and passion for choral artistry flourishing in the Upper Midwest.

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Dan Locklair: Sing to the World

Phoenix Consort
Adam Whitmore, director
Iain Farrington, piano
Convivium Records, 2026, 1:17:58

As the United States celebrates its semi quincentennial in 2026, choral conductors across the country are searching for American repertoire that explores the nation's musical and literary identity. Concert programs commemorating the 250th anniversary have created renewed interest in composers whose works engage directly with American texts and traditions. A possible selection among these voices is North Carolina composer Dan Locklair, whose choral music frequently draws

upon the poetry of major American writers, including Robert Frost and Walt Whitman. A Charlotte native, Locklair has developed a compositional language that balances lyricism and harmonic nuance while remaining attentive to the rhythmic and expressive qualities of text.

Browsing his scores, it becomes readily apparent that Locklair pays careful attention to text declamation, harmonic pacing, and dynamic contrast. A word does not pass by that is not connected to a musical idea. Sudden harmonic shifts illuminate moments of emotional significance, metric changes serve the text throughout, and carefully shaped dynamics allow each phrase to maintain direction. Even when paired with dense choral textures, which Locklair frequently utilizes, there is a remarkable clarity of line, ensuring that the text remains central to performance of his works. His music offers great depth for conductors and singers to engage with, rewarding careful preparation of each detail.

To that end, Locklair's music is in very capable hands with the Phoenix Consort led by director Adam Whitmore and pianist Iain Farrington. Throughout the album, their singing displays a great deal of sensitivity to the text. They provide dynamic motion to each line, as guided by the harmonic shifts present in the music. Their attention to balance must be lauded as well, which is a difficult task in the thicker choral textures demanded by Locklair's music. Farrington's playing matches this sensitivity, properly balanced into the collective textures.

The centerpiece of the album is *Sing to the World: A Choral Cycle in Five Movements in Celebration of Music*. As the subtitle reveals, each movement is the setting of a poem that reflects on the impact of music. While each movement is certainly worthy of discussion, I was particularly taken with the third movement, "An Hymn to the Morning," a setting of Phillis Wheatley's poem of the same title. Locklair weaves the four stanzas of Wheatley's poetry around a recurring refrain of the nineteenth-century spiritual "My Lord, What a Morning." The Phoenix Consort responds beautifully to the building arc of this movement, with each stanza's soloist beautifully ushering the work forward toward the final glorious declamation of "When the Stars Begin

to Fall."

Also featured on the album are two settings of celebrated New England poet Robert Frost. "For This is Love," originally written in celebration of a couple's thirtieth wedding anniversary, also represents Locklair's writing for the piano at its very best. The wordless opening minute of this work is a beautiful harmonic journey on its own, and it only expands from there. It is worth a listen or three. In "Bond and Free," Frost dichotomizes "Love" and "Thought" throughout his poem, to which Locklair responds by dichotomizing the tonalities of G major and G minor. The result is a carefully constructed work filled with harmonic turns to match the poetry.

The album also features two other works with strong sentimental connections for the United States. A triptych, *The Lilacs Bloomed*, based on Walt Whitman's 1865 poem mourning the death of Abraham Lincoln, dramatically captures the weight of this event in history. The second movement in particular is one of the most stirring moments on the album. "For Amber Waves" is a more unique setting of Katharine Lee Bates's well-known poem "America the Beautiful." Reminiscent of Knut Nystedt's "Immortal Bach," it is written as a spatial tune in which the singers surround the audience. The tune, however, is entirely original up until the final seconds in which the soprano soloist hints at the tune we all associate with this text.

Sing to the World offers a compelling reminder that American choral repertoire extends far beyond patriotic fanfares. For conductors searching for repertoire that thoughtfully engages on the American experience while offering meaningful musical depth, this album stands as an especially timely and rewarding recording.

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