Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Evensong
Brooks Firestone
CreateSpace
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Evensong, in the liturgical tradition, is a set of prayers, Bible readings, and responses. It is often completely set to music and takes place in the late afternoon or early evening. *Evensong*, the book by Brooks Firestone, is about learning to sing religious music in the evening of one's life. Writes Firestone, "At the age of sixty-nine, I was able to hold my own in the bass section of serious choral performances. The pure pleasure of that acquired singing ability is almost beyond description, and I love every minute of it…the Evensong time of life is full of potential."

Firestone is no stranger to accomplishment. An heir to the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, he grew up with "affluence and family name recognition" and worked for the family firm in England, where he met and married Kate, a successful English ballet dancer. The attractive, dynamic duo transplanted their lives to California in 1971 to run a winery and ranch, both award-winning endeavors, and Firestone also had a local political and civic career. Firestone's discovery, in his late sixties, that he could sing and wanted to, and that he and Kate had the chance to enjoy their musical talents together through choral music, gave Firestone the happy realization that creativity can begin anew in life's evening phase. His good fortune allowed him and his wife not only to join with others in presenting some of the world's greatest music—Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, Handel's *Messiah*, Verdi's *Requiem*—but to travel the world and sing in some of the sacred sites where such music originated.

Evensong describes these travels and the musical thread that connects them in lush detail, and it will delight music lovers, especially those who have found community in sharing voices. The book is interspersed with recollections from Firestone's life, including a cattle-cutting horse competition, cooking with visitors to the ranch, a description of Verdi's *Requiem* sung by inmates of Theresientstadt, the concentration camp, a tour of Spain with an international choral group, the delights of "honeymooning" with one's partner late in life, and the pleasure of

singing with young people (including one's own grandchildren).

Firestone writes briefly about Compline, the final prayers and songs at the close of the day. "Reminiscent of the burial service" and symbolizing the shutting down of conscious activity and accepting the darkness of sleep, Compline is a stage of worship and contemplation that Firestone says he is not yet ready to embrace, but he admits, "Perhaps there will come a time in Kate's and my life when the Compline service holds more appeal."

Firestone's book shows a broad knowledge base, and is written with wit, verve, and verbal acuity, as might be expected from a well educated, well traveled man who has also spent time in the political arena. The image of "evensong" is classically poetic, referencing both the end of day and the end of days. The book digresses only occasionally, with a few sociopolitical observations, family reminiscences, and commentary on the ailments of aging (aching joints, heartburn, hearing, and vision problems common to us all, but in Firestone's musings not to be glossed over). In the main, *Evensong* is targeted to those looking for inspiration to join with others and sing, to celebrate the spiritual stages of life with people of like mind. It seems that the author realizes that many of his readers are in the "evensong" of their own lives and seeking challenges and affirmation. Though the influence of *Evensong* may be limited, its impact on those who read it has the potential for powerful personal revelations of the sort that have so clearly motivated the author.

Firestone could have written a fuller autobiography had he wished to, given the lives that he and Kate have led. That he chose instead to focus on the possibilities inherent in singing in later life indicates not only his modesty but his sense that he has indeed retired from the larger stage and has chosen a smaller, more spiritually and emotionally rewarding platform on which to base his personal reflections.

Barbara Bamberger Scott