



Wednesday, May 10, 2017

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May 10, 2017, Cover Stories, Music, Classical

American spiritual journey

By **Jordan Buchholtz** Tue, May 09, 2017

The William Baker Festival Singers sang with vitality and sensitivity at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception last Friday evening. Their program consisted of arrangements of spirituals and other various American choral works as well as two Swedish songs.



Now in their nineteenth concert season, the semi-professional chorale is comprised of all volunteer singers, many of whom hold degrees in music while some are just vocational musicians. The wide variety of musicians was highlighted to the audience by director William Baker who mentioned that the chorus is a

“melting pot” of singers. The William Baker Festival Singers is a metro Kansas City-based ensemble and they are routinely performing in concert, recording, touring and broadcasting. Their signature repertoire includes short-form sacred a cappella classics and spirituals, which is what we heard for this concert. They also perform one major choral/orchestral masterwork each spring.

This program was divided into seven parts with no intermission. At first I was a little apprehensive when looking at the long program, but the repertoire flowed well together, and their timeless singing made the concert move quickly. The first section included two Swedish songs: “The Earth Adorned” by Waldemar Åhlén and “Sköna Maj” by Lars Magnus Béen. Student intern Eric Newlin's conducting on these pieces was clear and graceful as he led the choir in their rich and colorful sound. The first

song was sung in English, except the second verse sung in Swedish by soloist Kathleen Harrison. Her lovely soprano voice soared throughout the cathedral. The second song was sung all in Swedish, and was more upbeat than the first one. The cathedral again proved to be a wonderful space for the choir to sing; the reverb supporting their vibrant voices, although on some of the faster pieces when it was difficult to distinguish some of the words because of the delayed echo.

In between sets, Director Baker spoke about the pieces. He had had the opportunity to study and work with choir conductor and teacher Kenneth Jennings, who rightly so is one of Baker's idols. The ensemble continued their second set, which was comprised of three songs by Jennings; "The Lord is the Everlasting God," "Spirit of God," and "All you works of the Lord." In the beginning of the first song, the singers' droning was meditative and throughout the piece the choir highlighted the intricate harmonies in the music. The second song "Spirit of God" was sung in a simple, hymn-like manner. The third, "All you works of the Lord" was cheerful and upbeat and each cut off and release (also throughout the whole concert) was so precise, it was nice to see such unity within a choir. All three of the Jennings pieces showcased different styles of singing, and the ensemble's attention to detail and sensitivity in the music.

The third part of the program included two pieces, Sir John Tavener's "Village Wedding," and an arrangement of a piece by the current composer in residence for The William Baker Festival Singers, Ed Frazier Davis, "Set me as a Seal." The mood the choir set for the first piece, "Village Wedding," was different than one would expect. It was contemplative and solemn, from the low droning of the basses and the continuous echo of the line throughout the choir - "Oh Isaiah, dance for joy, for the Virgin is with child." The soloists for this piece fit well in with the texture of the music with their small but direct voices. "Set me as a Seal" is a text from the Song of Solomon and has inspired many composers, such as Davis. His arrangement of this piece was interesting and intriguing. The melody in the beginning is set in a minor mode instead of a major mode as one would expect. The choir captured the unique and pensive feeling of the piece while bringing out the complex harmonies Davis wrote and the various transitions to remote keys and chords within the work. This was not an easy piece.

Baker described the fourth set as the "American Experience" which consisted of three pieces; "Come ye Disconsolate" by Terre Johnson, "How Firm a Foundation" arranged by Alice Parker, and "The Road Home" arranged by Stephen Paulus. All three of these were reflective and aesthetic, and made for a nice, touching set. During "The Road Home" a sign language interpreter signed along with the words as

the choir sang. The next set included John Ireland's "My Song is Love Unknown" arranged by R. Douglas Helvering. The choir had a good sense of dynamic contrasts within the piece while Newlin conducted them. Then the ensemble sang another piece arranged by Davis, "O Magnum Mysterium." There are a lot of versions of this song, and according to Baker, Davis' arrangement is his new favorite setting of this work. They sung it in Latin and again, brought out the colorful and complex harmonies Davis wrote with their luscious sound.

The last two sets included four spirituals and an upbeat gospel piece, "Worthy to be Praised" by Byron Smith. For the spirituals, the ensemble started with "Give me Jesus" arranged by Larry L. Fleming. On this piece, the choir created a tranquil and peaceful atmosphere, their phrasing and forward motion to the climax of the song gave me goosebumps. Then they sang a reflective version of "This Little Light of Mine" arr. by Moses Hogan. Moving to more rhythmic pieces, the choir sang "Same Train" arr. by Alice Parker and "Way over in Beulah Lan'" arr. by Stacey Gibbs. The upbeat syncopated rhythms of these pieces contrasted well to the previous contemplative songs.

They ended the concert with inviting previous members of The William Baker Festival Singers to sing along on their signature piece, "Amazing Grace." All of the a cappella pieces in the program were phenomenal, the richness and beauty in their tone was nice to hear and made this concert enjoyable and engaging.

REVIEW:

The William Baker Festival Singers

19th Annual Missouri Home Concert

Friday, May 5, 2017

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

416 W 12th St, Kansas City, MO

For more information visit <http://www.festivalsingers.org>

Cover photo: William Baker conducts the Festival Singers. Photo compliments of William Baker.

By Jordan Buchholtz

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