

Seraphim Singers, "Music from the Germanic Tradition," Jennifer Lester, Conductor, The Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help ("Mission Church"), October 21, 2012

Drawing on a long tradition of choral music from Johann Schein (b. 1586) through Johann Nepomuk David (d. 1877), the Seraphim Singers displayed a sensitive and stylistic performance, a hallmark of the group. With an artistic grasp of the repertoire, Lester led the singers in a varied but beautiful tonal palette of mostly a cappella works of less renown. These lesser compositions and their composers deserve more attention than usually given by the choral community.

The program began with Max Reger's "Nachtlied," a prayerful reminder that God will "keep the night watch." Singing from the back of the nave, the chorus revealed their consistently beautiful tone and phrasing in a sometimes thick harmonic texture. Well balanced in the inner parts as well, the music had a continual dynamic flow and energy. The chorus was then transported (by walking of course) to the altar by combined singing of the hymn, "Give thanks to God, for he is good."

Breaking with chronology, Johann Schein's "Zion spricht: Der Herr hat mich verlassen" was next in this survey of the German tradition. Women's voices contrasted nicely with the male voices in the occasional divisions of the texture, and the dynamic contrasts in the Schein were done with expert control. The acoustics between the back of the nave and the altar showed a distinctly longer decay from the altar, which somewhat affected the clarity of the parts.

Hugo Distler, with his more compact harmonic style, appeared in the form of "Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied." Although the parts are definitely more complicated, each was nicely delineated. There was an unexpected long-held pedal in the soprano with intertwining of the lower parts. Diction was quite good in the Distler despite the slower acoustic setting.

David's "Veni Creator Spiritus" was a beautiful contrast to the Distler in its drawing on the original chant in its use of modal harmony deposited in a theme and five-variation form. The seven-verse work, each section given a different setting, helped to retain interest. In keeping with German tradition, David relied on compositional techniques such as imitation, canon, rhythmic acceleration of the original theme and similar devices, eventually arriving at a homophonic conclusion. The Seraphim Singers revealed a singular quality in a seemingly effortless musical flow.

The choral portions halted for a brief time, to display a remarkable flute solo of Sigfrid Karg-Elert, "Sonata in F# minor," played exceptionally well by Tim Macri, an assistant music director of the Basilica. The program rightly extols Macri as a highly sought free-lance flutist. His performance was not only technically proficient, but highly musically sensitive as well.

The smaller choral works of Felix Mendelssohn are not often performed but deserve to have a wider hearing. "Liturgical Movements for Double Choir" featured a "Kyrie," "Gloria," and "Heilig," (Sanctus), all in German. The latter movement is often sung, particularly by school groups and those church choirs with the resources. These three movements were typically Mendelssohnian in their quiet and thoughtful setting of liturgical text. The Seraphim Singers apparently handle languages well, although this program featured only German and Latin.

The audience was again engaged, this time with the well known "Now thank we all our God," accompanied with the powerful organ of the Basilica. The Singers returned to the choir loft for the conclusion of the concert, "Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf" by J. S. Bach, "Ave Maria" by Mendelssohn, Chorale-Improvisation on Nun danket alle Gott" by Karg-Elert, and the concluding work, "Verleih' uns Frieden" by Mendelssohn. The Bach, particularly with its faster moving harmonic/rhythmic structure, benefitted from a less live environment.

My one criticism lies with the venue. Were only slow-pulsed Renaissance music offered, the Basilica is a perfect location for the concert. This concert, in my view, could have benefitted from a slightly dryer environment. One does not always have choices, but carefully choosing the right setting is also a value to be considered.

Offering a shorter program than usual, the Seraphim Singers need only a few selections to reveal what a fine choral group this is. In defining choral sound, one looks for individual merits like choral tone, blend and balance, intonation, rhythmic vitality, artistic phrasing, appropriate style, and a certain joy in making music. Most good groups have some of these characteristics and one can enjoy those that convince you of their interpretations. Seraphim Singers has all the qualities listed here and with their focused repertoire for each concert, their performances become a model for putting together an enjoyable afternoon. Jennifer Lester is to be congratulated for bringing a valuable Boston resource to light.

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