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Seraphim Highlights Harmonic Marriage

by **Janine Wanée**

Last Sunday afternoon, the Seraphim Singers offered some of Britten's and Poulenc's most beloved choral works under Jennifer Lester with organist Heinrich Christensen. The program notes delved into the composers' upbringing, sexual orientations, and musical sensibilities, pointing out that singer Pierre Bernac was as compositionally influential to Poulenc as Peter Pears was to Britten and adding that both composers "felt a kinship with ordinary people ... each had an ability to transform traditional harmonic function into something novel while remaining accessible." The pieces are indeed accessible, but they are by no means easy to perform. They were executed with seasoned acuity by a mostly volunteer ensemble including a smattering of professional singers. The distinctive timbre of Seraphim's blend and stunning intonation were well-suited to the program, richly sensitive in the lower registers and poignantly luminous in the sopranos. Sound exquisitely served harmony in, for example, Britten's *Hymn to St. Cecilia*.

Seraphim Singers is in residence at the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Mission Hill Boston (the "Mission Church"). An opulent architectural achievement larger than some cathedrals, it presents acoustical challenges if one is to achieve clarity in such a cavern. For any piece accompanied by organ, it is absolutely necessary for the choir to be in the balcony with the instrument. *Hymn to St. Cecilia* was to open the concert, followed by *A Hymn of St. Columba* (with organ accompaniment), but seemingly for logistical reasons the pieces were switched, and *Cecilia* was delivered from the organist's balcony. Having the choir positioned so far from the audience contributed to *Columba*'s echoey and stormy qualities but took away from the mysterious profundity (and eroticism) of Auden's imaginative text for *Cecilia* (that text and music are married playfully is part of the genius of this youthful gem). It was not for lack of effort or execution that the diction was not as clear as it might have been; it is simply impossible for a moderately sized choir to compete with so large a space. On the other hand, Britten's setting contains precarious harmonic transitions that are breathtaking, and these the ensemble handled masterfully.

Frank Bridge holds an honored place as one of Britten's revered composition teachers. To give the choir time to process to the front of the church, Heinrich Christensen, one of Boston's finest organists, made full use of the Basilica's beautifully renovated 1897 Hutchings organ in a finely gauged rendition of Bridge's Edwardian *Allegro marziale e ben marcato*. For the fortissimo final chord, it rang through the vaulting as if shouted by God from the mountaintop.

The program continued with selections from Britten's A.M.D.G. (*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*). Selections included II. *Rosa Mystica*; III. *God's grandeur*; V. *O Deus, ego amo te*; and VII. *Heaven-haven*. Standout moments included the dancing upper-register sweetness of Hopkins's words in *Rosa mystica*, "Does it smell sweet, too, in that holy place?...", the short staccatos in God's grandeur well-done. And in general, the choir exhibited fine articulation, entrances, and

enunciation. The sweetest treats for the audience were to be found in *O Deus, ego amo te*, in the simplicity of its striking major chords, and finally in *Heaven-haven*, in which the women astonished the ear, making the poetry shimmer like moonlit blossoms, followed by the deep calm sea of male voices, “Where the green swell is in the havens dumb...”

Seraphim’s lush soprano section was again exquisite, intensely challenging Poulenc Mass in G Major, though there were some weak spots. This was the place in the program where one first glimpsed similarities and differences between Britten and Poulenc. Through Britten’s modality, one hears innovation without realizing how reliant it is upon triadic harmony, until contrasted with Poulenc, in which French ‘impressionist’ use of seventh chords comes out to play. *Agnus Dei* was notable for its beautiful and sparse soprano solo, sung by Rachael Luther, which echoed lightly through the Basilica with breathtaking stillness on the final “pacem.”

Christensen played another organ interlude while the choir processed to the balcony for the last half of the concert. Britten’s quiet and subtle Prelude and Fugue on a theme by Victoria preserved the mood of the Poulenc.

Poulenc’s Three Motets, *Salve Regina*, *Videntes stellam*, and *Hodie Christus natus est*, concluded his section of the program. *Salve Regina* contained a minor folklike quality that almost hinted at Rachmaninoff; *Videntes stellam* stood out for its triadic harmony, with each forte a little more brilliant, in keeping with the story of the three wise men; *Hodie Christus natus* concluded with a Renaissance playfulness in which the final Alleluia went perhaps a little sharp.

Britten’s *A Hymn to the Virgin* was a fine bridge from Poulenc’s Motets, via its antiphonal and strophic aspects, carrying us into the finale, the *Festival Te Deum*. Britten’s artful setting of text was again sometimes lost in the space, the choir being remote from the audience. The paradox of this piece arises from its being both dry and awe-inspiring. There were some moments that could have been more savored that were lost perhaps to a little too fast a tempo in the legato sections, and others which could not be helped because there simply was not enough volume. But the final, boy-soprano-like solo, “Let me never be confounded,” sung by Julie Button, was an inspiring ending to a remarkable program.

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