

From the Boston Musical Intelligencer

In: Reviews

NOVEMBER 7, 2011

Seraphim Singers' Choral America

by **Sudeep Agarwala**

To view Saturday evening's concert by the Seraphim Singers as simply the sum of the individual constituent parts of its repertoire seems to miss the entire point. Ingenious programming by Jennifer Lester culled together an almost inconceivable twenty-two individual pieces, performed in three sections, each focusing on the sharp contrast in compositional styles, extending from the very beginnings of American music in Colonial shape-note singing to commissions from as recently as this year.

Seraphim's concert was divided into three distinct sections, *Autumn*, *Winter* and *Spring*. It's clear that the concert was designed not only use St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Central Square as a performance venue, but to utilize the true meaning of the church as a performance space: audience members were asked not only to rise during the choral procession, but to join in the singing of hymns (*e pluribus, unum*, indeed!), experiencing American music as a living, breathing entity and not simply as material for yet another performance.

How refreshing to hear church music unapologetically performed in a church! Although the exposed Colonial harmonies of William Billings's *O Praise the Lord of Heaven* revealed some problems with tuning in the ensemble, the group seemed much more at home with significantly more challenging works. The ensemble warmed up in the following works: extended harmonies of Charles Ives's *Sixty-Seventh Psalm* or the more complex part-writing of Halsey Stevens's *Epitaph for Sara and Roland Cotton* found the ensemble more comfortable. And although I hate to admit liking anything by Eric Whitacre, how satisfying to hear complex harmonies of *Lux Aurumque* in a space appropriate for the nebulous chords and stately melodic lines. Of particular note was a radiant soprano solo performed by Anna Ward; and what an even more satisfying contrast, to have the work paired with Leo Sowerby's *Magnificat in e minor*.

Winter, which focused primarily on nineteenth- and twentieth-century music, continued along similar lines. Again, the audience was invited to join the choir in singing Hymn 439 (*What wondrous love is this, o my soul?*) to motivate a set of variations on the theme by the late Daniel Pinkham, performed on the organ by Heinrich Christensen, Pinkham's successor at King's Chapel in Boston. St. Peter's organ, especially in the capable hands of Christensen, is a surprise — a remarkably supple instrument. His performance exploited its full dynamic and textural range in Pinkham's dramatic and technically treacherous work. A through-composed setting of the *Magnificat* was performed as a solo piece by Anna Ward. She is to be commended not only

for her flexible and radiant tone but also her facile negotiation of Pinkham's — again — technically treacherous work. After William Bradbury's *Seek ye the Lord* and Vincent Persichetti's *Mass for Mixed Chorus*, came a commissioned work by Carson Cooman, *Exaltation*, numbered (in what is either an error, joke, or miracle for the twenty-nine-year-old composer) Opus 931. Cooman's work is an affable reading of Edith Abercrombie Snow's translation of Franz Werfel (third husband to Mahler's widow, Alma) — members of Seraphim smoothly transitioned between the rich homophony and cantankerous imitative passages of Cooman's composition, presenting the premiere with an intense, purposeful line that brought the work to life.

Spring, incorporated works that focused on *Easter*. Again, contrast was the palpable element of each of these; nineteenth-century works by Deodatus Dutton, Jr. (*Let the bright Seraphim*) or George Chadwick (*Benedictus*) were in stark contrast to twentieth- or twenty-first century works by Dominick Argento (*Easter Day*) and the reluctant choral composer, Aaron Copland (*Four Motets—Help Us, O Lord; Though, O Jehovah, Abideth Forever; Have Mercy on Us, O My Lord; Sing Ye Praises to Our King*). These latter motets were particularly well delivered by the Seraphim Singers; Copland's works are deceptively difficult, spare *a capella* pieces that leave each voice part treacherously exposed. Although exhaustion may have contributed to some issues with tuning, each of the four motets retained a distinct character as members of the ensemble fluidly moved through a virtual panoply of emotional states ranging from despair to exultation. The final section also included a solo organ work by Cooman (*Gloucester Estampie*), a hymn compiled by William Walker in his *Southern Harmony (Blow ye the trumpet)* and a brief penultimate recit by Daniel Pinkham (*On the Singing of Psalms*).

An engaging concert, the Seraphim Singers' unique approach to the American choral opus was less a presentation of choral music, more an incorporation and engagement of the audience in how music has developed and shaped America and Americans. How lovely not only to experience this music that we have known for some time but also to see new compositions become codified in the American canon. Seraphim Singers continue their season with music from the French choral tradition on Sunday, February 19.

Sudeep Agarwala is a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He performs with various groups throughout Boston and Cambridge.