

Review

WCLV's Jubilation! Elizabeth Stuart Church Choir Festival inspires friendly competition at St. John's Cathedral (May 9 & 10)

by Daniel Hathaway



Though The Ensemble from Federated Church in Chagrin Falls was the ultimate winner of the 2013 Jubilation! Elizabeth Stuart Church Choir Festival jointly sponsored by WCLV, 104.9 FM and the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, all six choirs took home a cash prize and a plaque as well as the invaluable experience of appearing with each other in a warmly supportive festival. The well-attended finals were held at St. John's Cathedral on May 9 and 10 and judged by Robert Page, Frank Bianchi and Peter Jarjisian.

On Thursday evening, the Festival Choir of Gesu Parish in University Heights (27 singers) drew the opening slot. Directed by Joseph Metzinger with instrumental assistance from pianist Julia Russ and violinist James Thompson, the ensemble sang a range of music from repurposed Handel choruses to African Chants, a famous Sistine Chapel motet and a Mozart mass movement. The group sang with focus, blend and good attention to dynamics. A well-balanced semi-chorus sang the verses of Allegri's *Miserere* and a brave, anonymous soprano sailed up twice to tricky high Cs. Thompson (recently concertmaster of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra) added a classy obbligato to Handel and Mozart.

Directed by Rita Cyvas-Kliorys, the Exsultate choir of St. Casimir Parish (Neff Road, 38 singers) brought a distinctly Baltic flavor to Thursday evening's lineup with Lithuanian works by Vanagaitis and Ciurlionis. A festive version of *Gaudete* from *Piae Cantiones* included tambourine and finger cymbals and the ensemble brought off Gallus's double choir motet *Haec est dies* with style (and only three tenors!) St. John's William Shaffer provided stylish organ accompaniment to Gounod's *Agnus Dei* and Handel's *Hallelujah, Amen*, and the choir's strong soloists crowned the ensemble's full-throated sound.

The largest choir in the festival, St. Sebastian Parish, Akron (63 singers), directed by Lynn Frey-Steward, closed the Thursday lineup, beginning with Brahms's *How lovely is thy dwelling place (Requiem)* and continuing with a spiritual using drums, a Handel chorus from *Messiah*, Biebl's *Ave Maria* and a contemporary church hymn with trumpet solo (Ian Indorf). The choir showed good style and rhythm on André Thomas's *Keep your*

lamps trimmed and burning, but sagged in pitch in Brahms and Biebl. A slower tempo would have made Courtney's broadly melodic *One Faith, one Hope, one Lord* more grand.

The smallest choir (14 singers) was first up on Friday evening when Suffield UCC Choir from Mogadore sang under the direction of David Baughman. Though limited in numbers, the group sang clean, well-focused performances of Nystedt's dissonant *Cry out and shout* and Zingarelli's *Go not far from me*. Robertson's *All in the April Evening* (an old chestnut) showed good control over dynamics, beginning hushed and ending strong. Popsy arrangements of *Espirtu de dios*, *Jesus loves me* and *We are not alone* followed (the latter with a fine solo by Lori Turner) and the set ended with a catchy bluegrass version of *We shall rise*, the only accompanied work on the program.

St. Hilary Parish Choir from Fairlawn (32 singers) was conducted by Jacob Young but the regular director is Carissa Young, who played organ and piano on Friday evening. The centerpiece of their set was the dramatic opening scene of Dubois's *The Seven Last Words of Christ* (another old chestnut) featuring excellent tenor and bass soloists Dan Colaner and Nick Campagna. That the choir has a number of inexperienced singers was clear from some hazy opening chords and erring tenors (in Tallis's *If ye love me*); that everyone in the group was committed and having a fine time singing was evident in Dawson's spirited spiritual, *Every time I feel the Spirit*. Ola Gjeilo's *Ubi caritas*, beautifully sung, was a commendable repertory choice.

Last to perform was the 29-voice "Ensemble" of Federated UCC Church in Chagrin Falls, directed by Amanda Powell with Marcia Snavelly, organ and piano, who began with a supple, finely-shaped performance of Hassler's *Dixit Maria* and blew everybody's sox off with a glorious version of Brahms's *Geistliches Lied*, *op. 30* (impossibly composed as a double canon at the 9th that ends up sounding like — Brahms). Jason McCoy's *Come, ye thankful people, come* seemed lightweight after the Brahms. Powell and the ensemble finished the set with a contemporary gospel number, Jeffrey Ames's *Let everything that hath breath* complete with drums, bass and percussion which completely infected the audience.

Perhaps one of the most telling pieces in the festival was John Rutter's intentionally catchy setting of *For the beauty of the earth*, which was sung quite differently by four of the six choirs. The Ensemble's performance of its gentle syncopations was both assured and unselfconscious — and almost made me fond of the piece. During its whole set, the Ensemble's singers were confident enough with the music to look like they were enjoying singing together.

As well as winning top prize for the festival the Federated Church group was voted audience favorite on Friday night. The St. Casimir choir received the audience prize for Thursday. Enthusiastic supporters turned out in force both evenings and seemed very proud of their home teams.

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