

French Baroque Vespers at the Church of the Covenant (Feb. 14)

by Nicholas Jones



Church music for Lent is usually framed as an incentive to penitence, to trimming down one's life and meditating on the transience of existence on earth. Particularly powerful during the Baroque period was the service of *Tenebrae* — performed during Holy Week and accompanied by the extinguishing of candles — for which many composers have left us wonderful settings. At Euclid Avenue's Church of the Covenant late Sunday afternoon, the diminishing light of a winter day sufficed for the darkening, and the music supplied the intensity.

The principal musical offering at this French Baroque Vespers service consisted of the first two of François Couperin's three exquisitely melancholy *Leçons de Ténèbres* of 1714. Sparsely voiced for solo soprano and continuo, these pieces are rich settings of dark texts from the biblical Lamentations of Jeremiah, texts that recount the affliction and bitterness of Jerusalem after the Babylonians' destruction of the city, and call on the people to return to the Lord.

Soprano Margaret Carpenter Haigh delivered these verses with expressive power, exquisite diction, and a clear, flexible voice that filled the Covenant's large nave. Carpenter Haigh, who sings with such groups as Quire Cleveland and Apollo's Fire and is pursuing a doctorate in Historical Performance Practice at Case Western Reserve University, skillfully negotiated the rhythms of Couperin's lush ornamentation as well as adding flourishes and ornaments of her own. She showed a particular sensitivity to Couperin's intricate text-settings and fast-changing harmonies.

Carpenter Haigh was accompanied by a continuo duo of organist Nicolas Haigh and cellist David Ellis. The Newberry Organ's ample organ loft, at the rear of the nave, afforded the singer and continuo players excellent sight lines: the ensemble was beautifully coordinated.

Other baroque instrumentalists — presumably also part of the CWRU music program — supplied some incidental music for the service; especially successful was the postlude, a lively chaconne by Georg Muffat. Earlier, Nicolas Haigh brought out the rich coloration of the Newberry Organ with a haunting *Récit de Cromorne* by Louis Marchand (daringly employing the tremulant) and a grand and reedy *Dialogue sur les Grands Jeux* by Nicolas de Grigny.

I'm not sure whether Lenten fare is supposed to be as pleasurable as what these excellent young musicians served up. Regardless of liturgical injunctions to penitence, this fine music of the French Baroque was as sweet and loving a Valentine's Day gift as one could wish for.

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