

Concert Report: Quire Cleveland's 'Carols for Quire': admirable choral refinement at Trinity

Published December 21, 2009

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Only now in its second season, Quire Cleveland has already achieved an high level of corporate vocal polish under the tutelage of its British founder and conductor Peter Bennett. The nineteen member professional vocal ensemble sang nineteen pieces in five languages in the first of three 'Carols for Quire' concerts at Trinity Cathedral on Friday evening, demonstrating an inspiring mastery of blend and intonation and sounding very much like the American version of an English cathedral or Oxbridge chapel choir (sure, Quire uses female sopranos and altos plus one countertenor, but things are changing across the pond these days).

Quire's program featured some well-known carols from England, Spain & Mexico, Germany and the US and Canada as well as a few charming rarities -- and four motets which gave weight to a program otherwise tilted toward short, strophic pieces.

The motets were John Sheppard's sprawly and gorgeous pre-Reformation elaboration of the plainchant 'Verbum caro factum est', Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck's festive 'Hodie Christus natus est' and Tomás Luis de Victoria's austerely beautiful 'Quem vidistis, pastores' and 'O magnum mysterium'. In these big pieces, Quire neatly and clearly negotiated tricky polyphony, expertly tuned parallel chords, leaned on dissonances -- Sheppard featured some ear-bending cross-relations -- and danced the triple-meter 'Alleluias'.

The carols were arranged in sets after the opening piece, Lassus' 'Verbum caro'. A trio of Spanish

pieces began with the well-known 'Riu, riu, chiu' which brought out a tambourine and spotlighted some of the fine male voices in brief solos. Fray Gerónimo Gonzales' 'Serenissima una noche', scored for high voices, provided a change up in texture and faded charmingly away at the end. Fabian Ximeno's 'Ay, ay, galeguiños' was remarkable for its folkishly nasal dialect.

Things turned suddenly dark with William Byrd's 'Lullaby', at once a slumber song and a lament for the children slain by Herod, and with Thomas Ravenscroft's sombre 'Remember O thou man', the Christmas carol only a Puritan could have written (remember, Parliament actually banned the holiday in the 1640's).

During the Ravenscroft, Church of the Covenant organist Jonathan William Moyer made his first trip from the bass section to the Great Organ for Sweelinck's variations on 'Hodie Christus natus est', a Christmas piece that probably would never have been played during a service at the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam in Sweelinck's day (Calvinists again, banning things). The four sparkling variations, which would instead have been heard during the composer's city-sponsored weekday concerts, were perfectly suited to the cathedral's Dutch organ. Moyer sought out expressive and colorful registrations, including some snarly reeds in the left hand against clear flutes in the right.

Sweelinck's motet ended the first half of the evening; the second began with 'The Huron Carol', which inspired a long and amusing paragraph in Ross Duffin's excellent program notes. Long story short, Quire sang the six verses of Jean de Brébeuf's seventeenth century poem in Wendat, the language of the Canadian Hurons, to a version of a French tune current in Brébeuf's time as arranged by Duffin. It was simple and affecting. The language must have been difficult to learn.

Victoria's 'Quem vidistis' followed, then Quire moved on to an American set. A setting of Martin Luther's 'Away in a manger' had a complicated history for such a charmingly unpretentious tune from a shape note collection published in Ohio (alas, Trinity's radiators began hissing in mid-carol, adding another extraneous noise to the curious hum that went on all evening). William Billings' 'A Virgin unspotted' and 'Methinks I see a heavenly host' and Daniel Read's 'While

shepherds watched their flocks by night', are "fuguing tunes" by America's first native-born composers. These rather rough-hewn Yankee pieces received the same refined vocal treatment as did the European works on the program.

Victoria's 'O magnum mysterium' was traveling music for Jonathan Moyer, who ascended once again to give us a thrilling version of J. S. Bach's 'In dulci jubilo', a brilliant setting of the chorale with interspersed cadenzas (perhaps this is what a hymn introduction sounded like in Bach's hands).

Quire's 'Carols' program ended with four German settings. Praetorius is having a big month at Trinity; yet another of his settings of 'In dulci jubilo' was stylishly sung there tonight -- this one with two soprano solos -- followed a finely nuanced performance by 'Es ist ein' Ros' entsprungen'. Johann Walther's 'Joseph lieber, Joseph mein' was a dialogue between high and low voices, reflecting a conversation between Mary and Joseph. The program closed with 'Wachet auf' in a composite setting to which Praetorius contributed the first two verses, J. S. Bach the third (the ornately harmonized final stanza from the cantata BWV 140).

Like Apollo's Fire the week before, Quire Cleveland provided Cleveland audiences with a sophisticated yet accessible version of a Christmas Concert, well conceived, intelligently structured, elaborately documented and beautifully performed. If it becomes a yearly event for Quire Cleveland, it will be interesting to see how Peter Bennett develops subsequent editions of 'Carols for Quire'. This was an auspicious start.