

**CityMusic Cleveland and Quire Cleveland
at Fairmount Church, Cleveland Heights (May 14)**



by Daniel Hathaway

Quire Cleveland joined CityMusic Cleveland for a brisk, expressive performance of a gorgeous late Schubert work led by CityMusic music director Avner Dorman at Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights on Wednesday, May 14. This was the opening concert of five that the two ensembles will present around the metropolitan area this week. (*Rehearsal pictured above.*)

Schubert's *Mass No. 6 in E-flat*, written during the last month's of the composer's life, rarely gets heard these days. That's a great pity. Though ill, Schubert found alluring and often surprising ways to set ancient liturgical texts, and applied his recent lessons in counterpoint to some of the most inventive fugues since J.S. Bach's. The E-flat mass offers a long sequence of gorgeous melodies, innovative textures, arresting harmonies and enthralling conversations between chorus and orchestra.

As Viennese masses go, it's lengthy. Its fugues are sometimes cut by conductors who don't trust Schubert's sense of proportion or think their audiences will get testy if the counterpoint drags on and on.

Avner Dorman took profit of his small, elite forces — a choir of twenty voices and a chamber orchestra of thirty-three players — to craft a propulsive, light-textured performance of the Mass that lasted only forty-five minutes from *Kyrie eleison* to *Dona nobis pacem*. That might be a world record for a work that can take nearly an hour to play with larger, slower-moving orchestras and choruses.

For the most part, that approach worked very nicely. In retrospect, Dorman might have taken time to luxuriate in some movements and passages that seemed a bit breathless. Though quickly paced, the fugues were well-shaped and beautifully articulated by Quire and the orchestra.

Perhaps most impressive was the balance and blend of voices and instruments. Quire, singing with strong, focused tone and impeccable diction, easily carried over an orchestration heavy with winds and brass, yet singers and instrumentalists also melded their tone together admirably. Ensemble was tight. A small glitch at the resumption of the *et vitam venturi saeculi* fugue was negligible.

This is a choral mass in which soloists have a small but important role. Tenors Joshua Blue and Seth Nachimson, a perfectly matched pair of voices, set up a ravishing duet in the *Et incarnatus est*, later to be joined by soprano Stacey Mastrian. Mezzo-soprano Sarah Beaty and bass Joseph Trumbo completed a quartet that sang with fine blend and presence in the *Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei* — accompanied in the former by some *Donner und Blitzen* from a passing thunderstorm.

To its credit, CityMusic let the Mass stand on its own and moved its usual mid-concert intermission reception to the end of the evening. It was important to hear the Mass in one sitting, and monumental as it is, it needed no companion work.

Fairmount music director Robert Moncrief and CityMusic president Ronald Strauss speculated that the church's only half-filled nave on Wednesday evening was due to local storm and tornado watches. Whatever the reason, those who stayed away missed a memorable performance of a rare masterpiece.

Photo via CityMusic's Facebook page.

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