

St. Olaf Choir at Severance (Feb. 10)

by Kevin McLaughlin



Guided by tradition, a palpable joy of singing, and their venerable conductor, Anton Armstrong, the St. Olaf Choir showed on Monday, February 10 at Severance what a choral concert can accomplish.

Concerts by this young choir from Northfield, Minnesota — approaching the end of this year’s fifteen-stop tour — have a cumulative and moving effect. It is

the nostalgia of collegiate choral singing in general, but also the awareness of St. Olaf’s storied tradition, the procession of purple robes, swaying bodies, and held hands. It is also the sound: the blend and technique of their voices — bright, expressive, coordinated — and their obvious and present joy in what they are doing.

Anton Armstrong, who may be approaching choral hall of fame status, is in his thirty-fifth year as choral conductor at St. Olaf, and only the fourth director of its Choir in a venerable line going back to 1912. He spoke infrequently but well: just when we were wondering if he would do so at all, he found a microphone and drew our attention to the themes of the program — chosen just after the last election — as commentary on “the times” we are in, the need to come together as a nation, to be kind to one another, to find common ground.

In addition to possessing heavenly voices, the St. Olaf Choir made a striking visual impression.

Soon after the music began, different rows of choristers began to sway in different directions. The effect was soothing, like watching ASMR videos or fields of wheat. Detached from anything rhythmic in the music, it was a little mysterious how they

managed to do that without colliding, but clearly these choristers are on the same wavelength.

Music of old masters began the program, including J.S. Bach's *Alleluia! O Praise the Lord Most Holy*, BWV 207A (sung in English), Palestrina's *Sicut cervus*, and Bach's motet *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*. The singers may have been encumbered by the presence of a chamber orchestra, just as tasteful and skilled, but who slightly covered up the choir.

Whether the text was Latin, German, or English, diction was generally excellent. Like an actor's exaggerated makeup, hard Cs and Ts and resonant vowels helped convey rhythm and meaning to the back of the hall.

Charles Gray, a professor of violin and viola at the college, participated as violist in the orchestra, and later contributed exceptionally expressive enhancements to *Before I Go My Way*, and *For the Sake of Our Children*.

Lily Mitzel (St. Olaf '24) was the outstanding oboe soloist in *This House of Peace*, her pure sound ringing in the hall. She and the orchestra ably supported tenor Peter Markham and soprano Sabe Dunlap, soprano, whose compassionate singing of the solo roles made the words all the more poignant.

Meredith Ivory, who stepped out of the alto section to play djembe on *Isondo Liyajika* (The Wheel Turns) added beats that were tasteful and stylish. In *For the Sake of Our Children*, Ivory (djembe), Leif Olsen (piano), and Julian Colville (suspended cymbal), all contributed impressively.

The vocal grace of baritone Will Schroth-Douma and soprano Emily Hagel helped scales fall from our eyes in *On the Common Ground*.

Citing current events and scripture, Armstrong connected St. Olaf's Evangelical Lutheran tradition to the messages of several songs on the second half, including *Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi*, *Holding the Light*, and *On Common Ground*. "I can't even read the news anymore," he said at one point.

Dotted with St. Olaf alumni, the audience was especially attentive. But you didn't have to be an Ole to appreciate the high standard on display, and the emotional impact or rightness of the program.

The last official selection was an African American Spiritual arrangement of *My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord*. These can be unconvincing out of the mouths of a

mid-western, Lutheran choir, but somehow, steering away from caricature, and imparting genuine human empathy instead, it was natural and satisfying.

The encore (“optional selection” in the program) was an arrangement of *Beautiful Savior* by the Choir’s founder, F. Melius Christiansen — a touching farewell until this great choir comes back to Cleveland.

Photo by Steven Garcia

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