

BlueWater Chamber Orchestra and Cleveland Chamber Choir: “I Believe!” (May 17)

By Peter Feher



Trust in a higher purpose is part of what's sustained BlueWater Chamber Orchestra and Cleveland Chamber Choir for many seasons now.

So it was fitting that the two local ensembles came together in a concert titled “I Believe! Knitted Voices of Justice and Faith” on May 17 at Trinity Cathedral. The evening not

only marked major milestones for BlueWater and CCC — their 15th and 10th anniversaries, respectively — but also spoke to a shared mission. Making classical music more accessible is a priority for both organizations, whether through pay-what-you-wish performances or programming that forges new connections.

Saturday's concert paired Margaret Bonds' *Credo* and Mozart's “Great” *Mass in c* in a righteous demonstration of belief that swelled to fill the magnificent space of Trinity.

Music and message are one in Bonds' *Credo*, which preaches a largely secular vision of brotherhood and equality. The piece sets, word for word, a 1904 prose poem by the African American scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois, who holds forth on racial justice in his characteristically prophetic way. By turns emphatic and lyrical, the text is structured around the simple, uncompromising refrain of “I believe” — a conviction that would resonate with Bonds during the U.S. civil rights movement some six decades later.

She worked on her *Credo* throughout the 1960s and early '70s, first in a piano version and then with orchestral accompaniment. In any case, the chorus is the bedrock of the composition, and even the writing for vocal soloists reinforces this impression. On Saturday, soprano Katherine Jolly sang several soft declarations that turned out to be mere prelude to the stronger affirmations that the Cleveland Chamber Choir would

sound. Bass Jelani Watkins came to the fore in the penultimate movement, “I Believe in Liberty,” his robust tone anticipating the full symphonic splendor of the finale.

CCC artistic director Gregory Ristow conducted the combined ensembles with smooth gestures that drew out the sound, sometimes at the expense of rhythmic precision. But no matter. At every decisive moment in the score, Bonds has the timpani drive home the point.

There was more of a sense of mystery to the evening’s second half, which featured Mozart’s *Mass*. As familiar as this music may be, certain questions surrounding the work are still unanswered — chief among them, why Mozart left one of his most profound creations unfinished almost a decade before his death.

The weightiness of what the composer did write can be felt from the outset. The introductory Kyrie emerges solemnly in the orchestra and chorus, a world away from the ebullience more typical of Mozart. BlueWater artistic director Daniel Meyer kept an exacting standard on the podium, and the musicians rose to the imposing challenge.

A bit of lightness was supplied by the quartet of vocal soloists. Soprano Abigail Hakel-Garcia floated through the runs and trills of the “Laudamus te” with sublime ease, and tenor Peter Wright contributed a similarly delicate touch to the “Quoniam.” Jolly and Watkins rounded out the lineup, with all four singers at last joining together in the Benedictus.

Of course, the instrumentalists shone just as bright. In a transcendent moment toward the end of the big soprano aria “Et incarnatus est,” a trio of woodwind players spun out a series of complementary cadenzas, as if to say sweetly, “We’re voices, too.”

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