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Hiroshima premiere closes Seraphic Fire's season in memorable fashion

By Lawrence A. Johnson
Classical Music Writer
Posted May 17 2005

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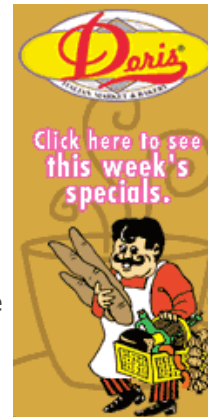
For a while it seemed as though Seraphic Fire's season-ending concert at the Church of the Epiphany would be overtaken by its extra-musical significance. Saturday's event marked the final appearance for Seraphic Fire and artistic director Patrick Dupré Quigley at the imposing Miami venue they have called home for the past three years. Quigley is leaving his post as Epiphany's music director to take Seraphic Fire full-time with a tri-county series in the 2005-2006 season.

Fortunately, the spotlight remained on the music, decisively so with the world premiere of Shawn Crouch's *The Road to Hiroshima: A Requiem*.

Marking this August's 60th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, Crouch's work takes its inspiration from Marc Kaminsky's poems about the victims of the nuclear devastation. For a seasoned composer, pulling off this daunting a project would be a challenge; coming from the 28-year-old Crouch, *The Road to Hiroshima* is a staggering achievement, an imaginative, powerful and deeply moving work.

Rather than getting tangled in the politics of the decision to drop the bomb, Crouch's work effectively concentrates on the human toll wrought by the devastation. The narrative moves backward in time, from the horrors of the aftermath and radiation to the moment of the blast, ending with Hiroshima as a bustling city of commerce before the event. In addition to chamber choir, Crouch's score calls for organ, children's choir, soprano and baritone soloists, and chamber orchestra with four percussionists

The Road to Hiroshima clearly owes a debt to Britten's *War Requiem* and stylistically there are flashes of Penderecki, Stravinsky and even Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*. The work begins evocatively with isolated shimmering chimes and bells that grow in



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insistence. Much of the score is jagged and fragmented, effectively painting the post-blast carnage in stark musical terms. The angular choral writing and atonal instrumental solos are balanced by radiant moments of beauty, enhanced by a wide array of quasi-Asian percussion timbres and colors.

Crouch effectively melds Kaminsky's elliptical lines with the traditional Latin requiem text, his solo vocal passages conveying the devastation with searing immediacy. There is a consolatory quality to the Introit, with divided voices and luminous entry of the children's voices. With a climax of tremendous force, the bomb's explosion effectively juxtaposes the Dies irae with Kaminsky's reportorial understatement of human suffering. The slow fade of the convivial bustle of a city that no longer exists at the coda is overwhelming.

Crouch displays remarkable confidence and facility, accomplishing his expressive ends with great precision and economy. The composer makes some merciless demands on his singers, not least the stratospheric heights in the *Pie Jesu*. Under Quigley's exacting direction, the Seraphic Fire singers did all that was expected of them, with well-blended and ardent vocalism throughout a long and taxing score.

The Epiphany Children's Choir appeared flummoxed at times by Crouch's polyrhythmic complexity, but soprano Carolina Castells and baritone James Bass brought eloquence, command and exemplary diction to Kaminsky's words. Quigley's scrupulous ear for balancing and textures provided clarity to the torrent of competing instruments, organ and voices. The chamber orchestra, made up of many top area musicians and New World members, performed magnificently -- not least the four hard-working percussionists.

The evening began with Jeffrey Vann's *A Procession Winding Around Me*. Vann's setting of four Whitman war poems for guitar and choir deploys his resources with great skill. Backed by the guitarist's spare chords and percussive drumming, the vocal writing reflects Whitman's elegiac and dirge-like words with simplicity and piquant effects. Guitarist Alvaro Bermudez and the choir provided a heartfelt and sensitive performance.

Lawrence A. Johnson can be reached at ljohnson@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4708.

WRITER

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