
Posted on Mon, Dec. 18, 2006

CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW

Seraphic Fire heats up music made for winter

Focusing on a winter theme, a Seraphic Fire concert featured premiere of Shawn Matthew Crouch's new choral work.

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You can safely rely on Patrick Dupre Quigley to defy expectations. A year ago, Quigley led Seraphic Fire in a bounteous concert of Christmas music spanning the globe and several centuries. This season, the chamber choir's artistic director pulled a musical reverse draw of sorts, with a firmly secular program of 20th- and 21st-century works on the theme of winter.

One of Seraphic Fire's most significant and memorable events was the world premiere of Shawn Matthew Crouch's ambitious cantata *The Road from Hiroshima* in the spring of 2005. The highlight of Saturday's concert at Miami Beach Community Church proved to be a new Crouch piece commissioned by the choir, *On Winter Afternoons*.

Cast in four sections and scored for double choir and piano, *On Winter Afternoons* sets several poems by Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. These "sonic postcards" paint a seasonal journey, moving from fall through a depressive winter afternoon and ultimately a regenerative spring.

Just 29, Crouch writes with a confidence and compelling individual voice that would be notable in a composer twice his age. His music avoids the gray conventions of much contemporary choral repertoire, yet it in no way plays to the populist gallery.

As with Crouch's *Hiroshima* requiem, *On Winter Afternoons* often employs offbeat writing, but his effects are used sparingly and always to an intelligent and effective musical end.

There are several artful passages, from the homophonic exultation of *Thou orb aloft full-dazzling!* to the astringent piano writing with its evocative plucked strings and eerie harpsichord-like timbres.

Most striking is the third section, on Whitman's *Thee for my recitative*. This virtuosic bit of tone painting sets stanzas by the poets against each other in the separate choirs. Reflecting Whitman's vibrant train imagery, the vocal lines grow more complex and accelerate like a speeding locomotive, an effect brilliantly realized by the singers under Quigley's direction.

A similar duality is found in Morten Lauridsen's *Mid-Winter Songs*, which opened the program. Set to five Robert Graves poems, the settings alternate light and darkness, sleeping and awakening. The choir conveyed the stark angularity of *Lament for Pasiphae*, as surely as the jubilation of *Mid-Winter Waking*, with the warm consolatory coda of *Intercession in Late October* nicely etched.

As in the Crouch work, Richard Dowling contributed fine piano support, though the instrument sounded rather metallic and clangorous in the cramped sanctuary.

In two French selections, the astringent purity of Poulenc's *Un soir de neige* was deftly contrasted with Debussy's *Trois Chansons*. In the latter's *Quant j'ai ouy le tabourin*, Suzanne Hatcher's deep chest voice proved amusing as the sleeper awakened by holiday revelers.

While well prepared and mostly technically secure, Saturday's performances were not always seamlessly blended, a recurrent factor this season. Also, while it may have been economically sensible for the choir to perform a commercial event on a ship earlier Saturday, doing so on a rainy afternoon just hours before a concert was probably not a good idea. It may have contributed to some fitful ensemble roughness.

John Rutter's cycle *When Icicles Hang* contains the composer's greatest hit, the indelible, haunting *Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind*. But the flanking sections are by no means also-rans, offering the infectious *Winter Nights* and the pub-like cheer of *Hay, Ay*. The rousing closer, *Good Ale* was thrown off with apt convivial swagger, no doubt sending many audience members out onto Lincoln Road in search of the same.

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