

Review



CHORAL MUSIC

Excellence All Around

12/13/03



By Charles Barber

Children's choruses have a natural advantage. They generally sing without vibrato. When sound is pure, undisguised by the sort of vibrato which corrupts pitch, it is possible to hear exactly. Thereafter, the challenge is to make things musical. At Saturday afternoon's Christmas Concert in the Calvary Presbyterian Church, the San Francisco Boys Chorus took full advantage.

Conductor and artistic director Ian Robertson is perhaps better known as Chorusmaster at the San Francisco Opera. Together with his colleagues June Bonacich, Margaret Clark, and Katherine McKee, he took them through a remarkably varied program. Most Christmas concerts, even of the best adult choruses, lead an audience through the usual landscapes of Sleigh Rides and Holy Nights. Perhaps half of this concert did so.

Before that, they sang sequences from a Handel *Te Deum*, a Bach Mass, a 14th-C *Hodie*, and works by Copland and Britten. All this was done by the numerous preparatory, apprentice, intermediate, and concert chorales which constitute the sequence of advancement in this organization. They were joined by a Men's Chorale, a group of eight bellringers and, in the first half, a chamber orchestra.



San Francisco Boys Chorus

The Handel was the centerpiece. Seven excerpts from the “Dettingen” Te Deum (HWV 283) were presented by the Concert Chorus of unchanged voices, the Men’s Chorale, a chamber orchestra, and guest baritone Jere Torkelson. It went very well. The fugato passages were clean and articulate, balances served the text, and tempi served the music. Among the boys, the ‘altos’ were particularly strong in pitch and phrase. In “The Glorious Company,” this ensemble was at its best. Words lived, energy was high, and Handel’s meaning shone.

Across the whole work, Robertson insisted on absolutely uniform releases at phase-ends, and got them. There were imperfections, of course, such as occasional problems matching dotted-note figures between orchestra and chorus. The timpani were too loud, and entering pitches in “To Thee All Angels” were haphazard. But it didn’t matter. They sang as if they believed. It should also be noted that the only singers who needed music books were the grown-ups. The boys had memorized everything, start to finish, believers all.

The several training choruses were even more joyful, and often sang in two and three parts. For children the size of fire hydrants, their voices were remarkably strong. It helped that their music was so wisely chosen. In Latin, they sang a *Personent Hodie* (literally meaning “to sing resoundingly today”), accompanied by a little band of bells, finger cymbals, and drum, played by some of the singers themselves. The work’s phrase-lengths are very short and perfectly inclined to the capacities of its singers.

Up to the task

In a three-part arrangement of “Little Bear,” the preparatory and apprentice choruses were even more

remarkable. Entrances were precise, and releases, no less so. A community chorus of adults would have had trouble with this music. These youngsters sang with a happy mix of discipline and aplomb.

Other highlights included work from Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, a very American 'Ching-a-ring Chaw' by Copland (say it fast and you get the idea), and Frederick Silver's witty re-thinking of "Twelve Days Before Christmas," led by Margaret Clark. She is a master of sign language. She prompts every entrance, signals meaning with semaphore, and corrects pitch as she goes. At its multiple levels it was like musical snakes and ladders, and her kids loved it. No wonder.

Although the whole chorus operates on great British boychoir training principles (and their vowels could sound almost, well, Scottish at times), these are American ensembles after all. Inevitably, with the lighter music there was an abundant choreography of goofy gestures. Everyone ate it up, especially the capacity audience of adoring parents and friends.

Most importantly, what their children in the San Francisco Boys Chorus are also eating up is an early education in languages, harmony, fugue and its cousins, and the very idea of community in music. What an appetite. What a menu.

(Charles Barber holds masters' and doctoral degrees in conducting from Stanford University, has served as assistant to Sir Charles Mackerras, and studied with Carlos Kleiber. In May 2004, he will conduct in St. Petersburg, Russia, his debut in that city.)

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