

# Review



## CHORAL

### A Gentle Reading, Treasured Ensemble

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#### By Eric Valliere

At their “Spring Concert” this past Sunday afternoon in Grace Cathedral, the San Francisco Boys Chorus led an audience of adoring parents and rowdy siblings through a tour of its remarkable training program. An array of music that crossed genres and national boundaries showed a hundred or so youngsters engaged in learning an impressive assortment of languages and styles, while struggling against their very natural and even charming impulses to yawn and fidget.

The hour-long first half showcased the preparatory, apprentice, and intermediate choirs, which appeared to range in age from 4 to about 12. It would be impossible to overestimate the preparatory group’s cuteness. The mere fact of their singing was enough — just — to soften the heart of even the most hardened critic. As time wore on, though, I hoped the musicianship would build noticeably with each successive group. Disappointingly, the evolutions were merely incremental.

Margaret Nomura Clark’s crystal clear direction raised the standard considerably, however, on the appearance of her Intermediate Choir. Their performance of Linda Spevacek’s arrangement of the Japanese folk song “Sakura” was clean and polished, with an austere nobility unlike anything heard before it.



### **San Francisco Boys Chorus in Grace Cathedral**

This was, in fact, something of a Nomura family show: Celebrated baritone Christopheren Nomura served as the soloist for the concert's centerpiece, Gabriel Fauré's Requiem. Nomura, himself a graduate of the SFBC's programs, has achieved some measure of fame in the world's opera houses and recital halls. He is deservedly well-known for his dramatic abilities in both of these arenas; his face is expressive and his voice capable of conveying subtle gradations of torment or wit. His big baritone resounded through the cavernous cathedral during his solos in the Offertoire and Libera me, perfectly in tune and focused and with all the emotion those dark texts require.

Soprano Nikki Einfeld, one of San Francisco Opera's current Adler fellows, had a brightly sweet tone that, although it didn't fill the hall like Nomura's, was a pleasure to hear. As a choice for the Pié Jesu, however, a piece occasionally performed by a boy soprano, conductor Ian Robertson's selection of her in this context was somewhat mystifying. One supposes it was a matter of contrasting her sound with that of the boys' choir, but some of the peaceful innocence of the text's gentle plea for eternal rest was lost in her more worldly, operatic delivery.

Robertson had gathered an impressive orchestra, largely drawn from the SF Opera, where he serves as choirmaster and occasional conductor. The tiny group swelled nicely in the reverberant space to surround listeners in a warm, soft-edged sound. The choir of about 50, with the more experienced and older men rather hidden in the back rows, sounded terrific. A porcelain purity of sound is their hallmark, impeccably in tune and with noticeable efforts toward diction. Some of the work's power was inevitably lost to the very qualities that made the performance special: these young innocents could hardly guess at the

grand human struggles with guilt and salvation represented in Fauré's music. But as a gentle reading of this gentlest of all Requiems, it cast this treasured ensemble in a very favorable light.

(Eric Valliere completed his doctorate in composition from New England Conservatory in Boston, where he was also on the Musicology faculty. Currently, Eric serves as Executive Director for Volti ([www.voltisf.org](http://www.voltisf.org)) and the Noe Valley Chamber Music Series [[www.nvcm.org](http://www.nvcm.org)], and as Managing Director of the BluePrint Contemporary Music Project [at the SF Conservatory]. His critical writings have also appeared on [www.classicstoday.com](http://www.classicstoday.com) and he is a frequent contributor to [www.andante.com](http://www.andante.com).)

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