

Maine Classical Beat

MUSIC CRITICISM, REVIEWS

VOX NOVA COMPOSES A SYMPHONY

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Vox Nova

Unitarian Universalist Church, Brunswick

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by Christopher Hyde

Concerts are generally a mixed bag. Even those in which the musical selections and performances are all first rate lack a certain unity.

The recent performance of the Vox Nova chamber choir, with the DaPonte String Quartet, was as integrated as a three-movement symphony— musically, emotionally and thematically.

Vox Nova, under the direction of Shannon Chase, is a 32-voice choir devoted to performing works of the modern repertoire. Since its founding in 2009, it has gained a reputation for innovation and excellence. The DaPonte String Quartet is arguably the pre-eminent chamber music ensemble in Maine.

Add the fact that a string quartet is probably the finest and most flexible accompaniment for a choir, and you have a very enticing combination. When Chase selected three closely related works for last weekend's concerts at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Brunswick, she composed a symphony.

I enjoy Eric Whitacre's writing for chorus, but his "Five Hebrew Love Songs," sung in their original versions, is something special. The poems, by Hila Pitman, are short, pithy and as metaphysical as John Donne. In all of them, the music complements the words to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Number five, “What snow! Like little dreams falling from the sky,” is incredibly good. The only other depiction that comes close is Debussy’s “The Snow Is Dancing,” from “The Children’s Corner.”

The second movement of the symphony featured the DaPonte alone, in Erwin Schulhoff’s First String Quartet, shipped to Russia for safe keeping before the composer’s death in a Nazi concentration camp. This is a work that the DaPonte has made its own, and every time they play it, something new is revealed.

In the dramatic performance on Sunday, the quartet seemed to echo the themes of the preceding work in its rapid alternation of joy and sorrow, ending with a ticking clock that eventually stops dead. Its beat, 60 on the metronome, is that of the human heart.

The final movement was “The Golden Harp,” written by Gwyneth Walker in 1999 specifically for SATB choir and string quartet. It comprises eight settings of poems by Rabindranath Tagore.

Walker said of the poems: All of the poetry selected for The Golden Harp is found in Tagore’s collection, Gitanjali, published in 1913. The poems span the course of the poet’s life. And the form of The Golden Harp mirrors this pattern. The work is divided into seven sections: triumphant at the beginning and close (#1 “Invocation” and #7 “Salutation”); more introspective in the interior sections (#2 “Beloved,” #3 “Prayer,” #5 “Thou Art” and #6 “My Tears of Sorrow”); and rising to a celebratory middle section (#4 “Light, My Light”).

The message of The Golden Harp is spiritual, and yet very close to the center of human emotions. Tagore’s poetry extols the beauty of the divine and the beauty of the soul within – the beloved as creator, the beloved as lover. “Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well.”

The composer was in the audience, and in my opinion, could not have asked for a better reading of her work, whose emotional intensity at times was enough to bring audience members to tears. It brought the symphony full cycle, in its metaphysical concatenation of earthly and divine love. The depiction of divine light in setting IV more than equalled Whitacre’s musical vision of snow.

The poetry readings by Rose Horowitz were clear, well enunciated and emphasized all the right words, no mean feat for a senior at Mt. Ararat High School. And the purity of Anna Schwartzberg’s solo soprano part was heavenly. Bass Drew Albert was also first rate in the solo—“Mother, I shall weave a chain of pearls”— that makes the protagonist universal rather than male or female.