Each December ARG reviews two or three Christmas concerts across the country. This year William Albright attended an opera world premiere, Jason Victor Serinus hoped for perfection in Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, and Jack Sullivan topped his coverage of New York Early Music's autumn festival with their "Burgundian Christmas." — Editor

**Early Music New York**

*Jack Sullivan*

I'm normally a Scrooge when it comes to the neo-Victorian kitch that passes for Christmas music. The older the better for me, so the Early Music Foundation's "Burgundian Christmas," Franco-Flemish polyphony performed by Early Music New York directed by Frederick Renz, had the right pieces for my musical stocking.

The adventurous program consisted of vocal and instrumental music from the 15th to 17th Centuries, juxtaposing ancient chant, golden-age polyphony, rollicking drinking songs, and instrumental numbers, including ensembles and solos. There was a great deal of obscure repertory ("Anonymous" was the most frequent composer), but Renz offered no introductory speech, as we often get in such concerts, to guide the listener. We did have his witty program notes. His philosophy, he told me, is "no sermons, just music." (At the opening concert in the New York Early Music Foundation Celebration in October [Jan/Feb 2018], Renz told the audience that introductory speeches "depressed" him because they took up valuable music time.) The 10 men in the choir marched out and launched immediately into a jubilant motet, Busnois's "Noel, Noel," then moved through the rest of the 90-minute program without pausing for an intermission.

This concert, sung with radiant serenity in the slow pieces and a breathless urgency in the faster ones, offered a mini-history of polyphony from the sinuous lines and hauntingly hol­low harmonies of Dufay, Brumel, and Josquin to the warmer, more intricate counterpoint of Lassus, Messaus, Jacob van Eyck, and Sweelinck. (What a difference a third makes!) Sometimes early music concerts are too much of the same thing, but not this one. Eclipsing announcements of Christ's birth were mingled with uninhibited drinking songs, the Newborn King displaced by Saint Bottoms-Up. Inter­spersed with religious and profane texts (the layering of which was not uncommon in old music) were elegant dances for lute and guitar, bass and tenor dulcian, and four different recorders, performed with freedom and verve.

The programming had both variety and symmetry. One piece blended seamlessly into another, with vocal and instrumental works reinforcing each other. The final choral sounds of "Nato Nobis Salvatore" in part VI, for example, blended magically into the beginning of part VII, a delicate instrumental Carillon by Nicolas Vallet, followed by Messaus's choral piece, 'Ben Kindeken Is Ons Geboren,' which blossomed into airborne variations on the same theme for solo recorder.

The program was repeated in two New York locations. I chose the December 10 concert at the Cathedral of St John the Divine and was glad I did. Walking through the massive Gothic spaces of the cathedral into the inti­mate space of St James Chapel, which seemed like a secret hideaway for the concert, was a transporting experience in itself and set the mood for the concert. The sound was clear and warm; the most attenuated nuances on lute and guitar were audible, and the big, fruity sound of the dulcian blatted happily through the chapel. By the end, Sweelinck's ecstatic repeated allelujahs had put my usual grumblings about Christmas music to rest.

**Bach: Christmas Oratorio**

*Jason Victor Serinus*

So esteemed is Masaaki Suzuki's Bach Collegium Japan that I had expected to encounter perfection at their December 9 performance of four of the six cantatas from Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* at San Francisco's Davies Symphony Hall. I even thought of drawing analogies between the art of Japanese flower arranging and Suzuki's ability to draw perfectly proportioned, intrinsically balanced lines from his forces.

Instrumentally at least, Suzuki succeeded admirably. Never have I heard period woodwinds blend as sublimely as these two flutes, two oboes d'amore, and two oboes da caccia. The section's deliciously warm, mellow transparency would have drawn a wide-eyed smile from many a babe and caused it to clasp its hands in delight. At the other end of the spectrum, I heard but one bump from the other­wise sterling, cheer-generating three-trumpet section led by Dave Hendry. First violin section leader Natsumi Wakamatsu's solo displayed a far more earth-pinched sound than customary.

The Collegium's illuminated music-making was highly appropriate for celebratory sacred cantatas, whose music was, for the most part, adapted from two decidedly secular royal birthday cantatas Bach had written roughly a year before the six Chi­ntas were unveiled during the 13th Christmas and Epiphany (Dec­ember through January 6). Although there was a fair amount of reverence and glitz through the six cantatas, there was by joy and optimism.

The chorus of 16 included 3 male and 1 female alto. Each section included four soloists: soprano Sherzaan, countertenor Jay Carter, tenor Zac­ki, and bass Dominik Wörner. Whi­le Renz spoke with authority and smiled when smiles were called for, Wörner's voice in his section, it contributed to the bass dominance in choruses which so often sing the leading line. Wörner's voice could not have been better, and their dulcian and guitar were audible, and the big, fruity sound of the dulcian blatted happily through the chapel. By the end, Sweelinck's ecstatic repeated allelujahs had put my usual grumblings about Christmas music to rest.

The other three soloists cared for themselves in to ensure that they dominate their sections. Pantaloon's unique instrument whose glory lies in its robust, laser-sharp, vibrato-less tone burst into brilliance high in the opera world. While she may not be the most sonorous of early music, strong, clear, and true, she marvel, Alas, owing to Wörner's opulent sound, which is often the leading line. Wörner's voice could not have been better, and their dulcian and guitar were audible, and the big, fruity sound of the dulcian blatted happily through the chapel. By the end, Sweelinck's ecstatic repeated allelujahs had put my usual grumblings about Christmas music to rest.

Far better was Pantaloon's countertenor, a recitative as the Angel with superb voice. He was a marvel. It is fair to say that a fair amount of reverence and glitz through the six cantatas, there was by joy and optimism.

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