

Christmas Cheer 2017



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 off 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 kitsch 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. Ecstatic 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, 'Een 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*

Bach Collegium Japan/ Masaaki Suzuki
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 clap 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 earthen-tinged sound than customary.

The Collegium's illumined music-making was highly appropriate for celebratory sacred cantatas, whose music was, for the most part, adapted from two decidedly secular royal

birth-day cantatas Bach had written roughly a year before the six Cantatas were unveiled during the 13th an Christmas and Epiphany (December through January 6). Although there a fair amount of reverence and galed through the six cantatas, the by joy and optimism.

The chorus of 16 included 3 male 1 female alto. Each section included four soloists: soprano Sherezad countertenor Jay Carter, tenor Zac and bass Dominik Wörner. While strong voice spoke with authority smiled when smiles were called for ed into the background during While his may not have been the voice in his section, it contributed bass dominance in choruses where often sing the leading line. While sopranos sang lower in their range boomed out over them.

The other three soloists careful themselves in to ensure that they dominate their sections. Pant unique instrument whose glory lies ably strong, laser-sharp, vibrato-less burst into brilliance high in the op of Davies. While she may not be the son of early music, her strong, cl marvel. Alas, owing to Wörner's their duet in the Third Cantata fa geal.

Far better was Panthaki's Seco recitative as the Angel with superb gelist Wilder. It is fair to say that a ber of audience members fell in lo slim, handsome tenor. His voice warm when appropriate, energize pose, and a joy to listen to. Al seemed to tire a bit at concert' voice's leading edge softened noti sound was consistently admirable. was exceptional. The sound he p the start of his solo lullaby to the in the Second Cantata, 'Schlafe, m ster, Geniesse der Ruh' (Sleep, m enjoy your rest), was as warm and one could wish. As with many co who sing falsetto, he sounded a m the top of the range, but lower dow and beauty were world-class.

Was the performance perfect was marvelous nonetheless, and fil beauty that makes life worth living.