

The Boston Globe

MUSIC REVIEW

Cantata ensemble compares eras with 'Extended Arch'

By Matthew Guerrieri NOVEMBER 07, 2011



Friday's season-opening concert by the Cantata Singers and conductor David Hoose, "The Extended Arch," matched works by J. S. Bach and contemporary composer Stephen Hartke, a discussion across eras. But the contrast brought to the fore a kind of historical diverging of content and technique, with the newer music tending to value craft as an end in itself.

Hartke's "Precepts," given its full premiere (the group introduced two of the three movements in 2007), sets biblical passages of political point, admonitions against greed, reminders of duty to the poor and outcast - Occupy Scripture, so to speak. The new first movement had oboe soloist Peggy Pearson, strings, organ, and women's

voices in scurrying susurrations, using Matthew 16:26 ("What does it profit a man," etc.) to generate an image for modern activists: a twittering storm.

But the rest of the piece put craft in the foreground, subsuming forthrightness into burnished richness. Hartke's craft is certainly admirable, the harmonic twilight between tonality and atonality made attractively luminous - but the texts' edges were rounded off.

Deuteronomy's edict to pay the poor their end-of-day wages was cast as a reflective sunset; the finale's voice of Wisdom, haranguing passersby, became a skillfully roiled but often discursive choral haze, syncopations from the instruments deftly placed but intermittent in their attack. Both piece and performance were polished, but the control softened the confrontation; Hartke's elaborate gloss, though impressively argued, seemed distanced from the rebuke's blunt power.

In "A Brandenburg Autumn" (a Boston premiere), Hartke offered a similar gloss on Bach, using the same orchestra as the first Brandenburg Concerto. But where Bach danced, Hartke's concerto revolves and stalks, short motives combined and recombined into low-ceilinged, sharp-cornered edifices. Even the finale, a brash hornpipe, had that oblique quality, nimbly circling ideas rather than transforming them: music of more ingenuity than revelation.

The first Brandenburg itself (BWV 1046) opened the concert, the performance drawn in long, boldly easygoing strokes, every strand given generous shape: a happy profusion, groups of instruments talking over one another in perfect harmony. The group closed with Bach's so-called "Lutheran" Mass in F (BWV 233), again delivered with stylized conversational flair. (That included soloists James Dargan and Karyl Ryzcek; Lynn Torgove gave the "Quoniam" more stern oratory.)

But the conversation had architecture and progression; every entrance of the overlapping "Cum sancto spiritu" theme added a new facet, like an escapement ticking the form toward its culmination. The clockwork was impressive, but also kept time.