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MUSIC REVIEW

Cantata Singers astonish in breathtaking pairing

By Jeffrey Gantz



CAMBRIDGE - The Cantata Singers' pairing of obscure works by Alfred Schnittke and Arvo Pärt Saturday at First Church, Congregational, was the kind of masterstroke that looks obvious - after someone else has thought of it. Schnittke was born in Russia of Volga German Jewish parents and spent the end of his life - he died in 1998 - in Hamburg. Pärt was born in Estonia and lived in Vienna and Berlin before returning to his native country at the turn of the century. Schnittke's early influence was Shostakovich; Pärt's was

Schoenberg and serialism. What they came to share was the Eastern Orthodox Church (Schnittke converted) and a mystical musical language that seems part cathedral and part constellation. Led by Cantata Singers music director David Hoose, the program was called "The Astonished Breath," and it was certainly astonishing.

The first half was given over to Schnittke's "Concerto for Choir" (1984-'85), a 45-minute masterpiece in four movements whose Russian text is drawn from the 10th-century Armenian monk and mystical philosopher Grigor Narekatsi's "Book of Lamentations." The opening movement, a hymn of praise, is an exultation of larks, or angels, with as many as 16 vocal lines forming star clusters. An "alleluia" is threaded through the more sober second movement; the beating of dove wings is heard in the fourth, or perhaps it's the oscillating universe.

The Cantata performance of this ferociously difficult piece sounded oddly Western, and a little careful, not rapt, the Russian pronunciation good but not idiomatic. The big bang of the second line (“Bestowing priceless gifts upon us”) was just a fluttering exodus of bats, and the ghostly echoes that end the second movement weren’t ghostly enough.

But it was a devout reading, and there was plenty to admire as well, like the deep basses, and the starburst on the word for “creating,” “tvoryashchi.”

Pärt’s 1990 (revised in 1997) “Berliner Messe,” which made up the program’s second half, is in Latin, and it reflects Western plainchant and Poulenc in the same way that the “Concerto for Choir” reflects Orthodox chant and Stravinsky (especially the Stravinsky of “Zvezdoliki”). The piece can sound bleak and austere to a fault, an aural depiction of the sleek blue glass church and bell tower of Berlin’s rebuilt Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche. But the Cantata Singers, using the original version for chorus and organ, incorporated that church’s bombed-out ruin as well, the rough stone providing warmth and emotional weight and even richness. Berlin and Pärt could be equally proud.