

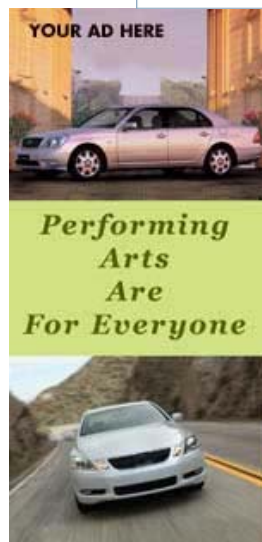
The Boston Musical Intellig

**a virtual journal and blog of the classical music scene in
Boston**

**Robert Levin, editor; Bettina A. Norton, executive editor; Lee Eiseman,
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January 25, 2012

Common Tones: Two Takes on Eternity

by [Ben Houge](#)

The program for the Cantata Singers' "Astonished Breath" performance on January 21 at First Church in Cambridge welcomed listeners with a near apology for straying from the music of Bach in recent concerts. They needn't have worried. The sanctuary was filled to capacity with an enthusiastic audience who had braved the first serious snowfall of the season to experience the *Concerto for Choir* of iconoclastic Russian composer Alfred Schnittke (who died in 1998) and the *Berliner Messe* by Estonian Arvo Pärt (still quite active).

The Schnittke piece, which opened the program, was larger than the Pärt by every conceivable metric, based on a turbulent (if somewhat loquacious) text by the medieval Armenian monk Grigor Narekatsi. It was longer, but also more variegated, with sudden shifts to new key areas, as rumblings and sighs suddenly gave way to clarion major triads (one of the piece's most effective techniques), evoking another choral masterwork by Schnittke, the *Psalms of Repentance*. Schnittke also employed the robust, low voicings of the Russian choral tradition, most remarkably in the third movement.

Pärt's *Berliner Messe* is much more modest in scope, and for this humility it shone more clearly, its crystalline harmonies hovering in serene contemplation, punctuated by the precise playing of organist Ian Watson. The text is that of the traditional Latin mass, with the addition of a "Veni Sancte Spiritus," traditionally sung at Pentecost. Pärt thoughtfully includes options for the music leading into this section, depending on the liturgical season; in this case the text for Easter was sung.

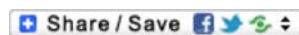
The forces of this wide-ranging performance were ideally suited to the First Church sanctuary, over fifty singers filling the space with glorious sound. At several points in the Schnittke, the choir rose to a reverberant climax, but perhaps even more impressive for a group of this size were the hushed passages at the end of the *Concerto*'s second movement, or the *Messe*'s numinous alleluias.

And despite mild protestations to the contrary in the program notes, the Pärt and Schnittke pieces shared some illuminating commonalities. Both works prominently employed sustained pedal tones as a reference point against which other melodies might be set in relief. For Schnittke, these sustained tones served as a kind of wedge, to fracture a scale and excavate new lodges of harmony, providing a mystical glimpse into alternate dimensions. For Pärt, on the other hand, these tones were used as a basis for the shifting spectral effects that have been the basis of his mature style, inspired by the overtones of bells.

The *Berliner Messe* is unquestionably the better known of the two pieces on the program, amply represented in recordings. However, the second movement of Schnittke's *Concerto* has also achieved fame in a different guise; in an arrangement for string quartet, it closes the Kronos Quartet's 1997 album *Early Music*, an exemplary collection that also features Pärt's *Fratres*, suggesting that this pairing of composers is not so far-fetched after all.

Straying from the formula has served the Cantata Singers well in the past. As the Boston Symphony Orchestra concluded its two season survey of the symphonies of John Harbison with the premiere of his Sixth just last week, it is worth recalling that the Cantata Singers' first new music commission, Harbison's *The Flight into Egypt*, won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Music (and they have recorded a thrilling account on New World Records). The Cantata Singers promise a return to the music of Bach, that inexhaustible wellspring, for their upcoming 50th anniversary season (a move Harbison himself would likely condone, as he is currently embroiled with Bach Institute activities at Emmanuel Music; closing concert Tuesday evening!). But first, two more enticing programs await in the current season: a concert on the theme of The Passion on March 18 (including Bach's Cantata BWV 4 *Christ lag in Todesbanden*) and a program of music by New England composers on May 12.

[Ben Houge](#), who teaches video game music at Berklee College of Music and Boston University Center for Digital Imaging Arts, is currently an artist in residence at MIT, where he will present his work with the Media Lab's Responsive Environments group in a panel discussion on February 15.



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