

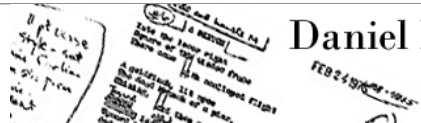
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Jan 25 2012

Fuse Concert Review: Cantata Singers Warble an "Astonished Breath"

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The Cantata Singers approached both works with the sensitivities that each required. Music Director David Hoose retained the intensity of the music through his economic and unpretentious, but insistent, conducting.

The Cantata Singers at the First Church in Cambridge, Cambridge, MA, on Saturday evening, January 21.

by **Anthony J. Palmer**

Two extraordinary choral works, one masterful conductor, and a chorus of dedicated and talented singers were the ingredients for a remarkable recipe of successful music making. At first glance, *The Concerto for Choir* by Alfred Schnittke, Russian composer, now deceased (1998), and the *Berliner Messe* by Arvo Pärt, Estonian, now dividing his time between Tallin and Berlin, was a highly questionable pairing. But art is not always logical or reasonable. The concert, titled *The Astonished Breath*, combined both works into a strange, but rewarding, contrast.



Composer Arvo Pärt

The *Concerto* is as demanding a work as anyone can imagine and the *Messe* is its total opposite; the first is highly complex with thick and opaque textures, exhibiting rare moments of relaxed consonance, the second is minimally constructed with a melisma sprinkled quite sparingly. That is the essence of their partnership, like the yin and yang of our daily lives, alternating between complexity and unpretentiousness.

The *Concerto*, some forty minutes of intensity in four movements of varying length, and the *Messe* of some twenty-four minutes, in the usual Latin mass formula — except for a "Veni Sancte Spiritus" and two brief "Alleluias" interjected between the "Gloria" and the "Sanctus" — were related in their mystical implications. This was music of another plane of existence, transcending temporal awareness. Consistently slow moving, both works took their power from the strength of the expression in their largely homophonic and mostly syllabic settings.

Susan Miron *on music.*
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The text of the *Concerto* was taken from the third chapter of *The Book of Lamentations*, translated into Russian from a Latin poem by an Armenian monk of the tenth century, Grigor Narekatsi.

The *Concerto* comes by its sonic qualities rightly, being an extension, in my view, of the Rachmaninoff *Vespers* and the Tchaikowsky *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, albeit drawing on twentieth century harmonics. The Russian tradition of sacred music is broad and deep and has a signature sound. The Cantata Singers were well in the tradition and worthy of comparison to the Russian recordings of this work.

Although I found no Russian language coach listed in the program, one has to assume that there were sections of the rehearsals dedicated to pronunciation because the Russian was outstanding. The singers' diction was excellent and one could follow the text in Cyrillic printed in the program quite easily. Being formally a church choir director in a Catholic church, I can verify that their Latin was above reproach.

My first impression of the chorus was of their consistently fine tone quality, forceful without force on the *fortes* and mellifluous on the *pianos*. Considering that the soprano section was frequently called upon to soar above the staff on numerous occasions, maintaining a proper focus is no small feat. Schnittke often used a high soprano sustained pitch like a reverse pedal from which hung moving parts like a Calder mobile. Their tone was matched by the alto section, exemplified by their entrance on the third movement of the *Concerto*. A word about alto vocality: so much of the tessitura lies in a speaking voice range that requires deliberate focus on producing a resonant sound. The men frequently exhibited the same attention to vocal production as they did in the opening of the second movement.



Composer Alfred Schnittke

Throughout the performance the group's rich and resonant vocal quality effectively transmitted the meaning of the Russian text. Each movement was characterized by both praise and humility. Movement one honors the mystery and mourns the inability to express in sterling words what God deserves. The second movement reaches out to a pedestrian list of sinners to guide and comfort their distress. Movement three begs forgiveness, while the closing movement pleads for acceptance of the monk's praise. The metaphorical qualities of the poetry were devotedly expressed.

Other qualities I found appealing were the secure and anchored intonation throughout both works, balance of the various vocal parts, and the unity of sound in each section. The Cantata Singers, a diverse group across ages and ethnic background, were focused as necessary in the complexities of the *Concerto for Choir*, a work that measures a chorus's mettle. The *Berliner Messe* has its requirements as well in the deceptively straightforward minimalist techniques of Arvo Pärt, which would be easy to perform with less care, but less effect.

The Cantata Singers approached both works with the sensitivities that each required. David Hoose retained the intensity of the music through his economic

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and unpretentious, but insistent, conducting. All in all, this was a demanding but wonderful evening of listening to rare performance in words and sound. The Cantata Singers have produced a fine list of CDs — these works would be terrific additions.



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