

The Boston Globe

PUBLISHED MARCH 15, 2010

Cantata sings of the spirit over centuries

By David Weininger



The Cantata Singers' Friday concert was one of the most skillfully constructed programs in recent memory, taking listeners from the 17th century to the 20th and back again. More important, there was a sense of works of different eras and styles speaking to one another, instead of merely sitting side by side.

It began with a spry reading of Monteverdi's motet "Laetatus sum," a series of ornate inventions on a recurrent

four-note bass line which the program note slyly called "the 'Bolero' of the 17th century." That was followed by three a cappella motets by Heinrich Schütz, on whom the group is focusing this season. These were intricate yet reserved, carrying a sense of private worship.

Stravinsky's Mass, written in the 1940s, was both the concert's most recent piece and the most archaic in tone. It has the reverential air of chant and a deep sense of service to the text. During the "Sanctus," an audience member passed out and had to be attended to; unaware of the interruption, music director David Hoose continued right on to the closing "Agnus Dei," containing some of the Mass's most affecting music.

The works of the first half were largely austere — even the Monteverdi, with its restricted harmonic palette. As the journey backward began, the music was suddenly florid and expansive. First up was Poulenc's a cappella Mass in G, a relative rarity. Full of pungent dissonances, the music has the rapidly shifting moods of Poulenc's better known works but also an unusual seriousness of purpose.

It's also startlingly difficult to sing, with some cruelly exposed writing for the sopranos. Here, as in a few other places, the Cantata Singers didn't quite sound up to their usual high standards, with some uncertainty in both pitch and ensemble. The high point was an ethereal solo in the "Agnus Dei," gorgeously sung by soprano Luellen Best.

More Schütz motets followed, among them one of his finest pieces, "Saul, Saul, was verfolgt du mich?" which sets two lines from Saul's conversion scene on the road to Damascus. This is music of astonishing psychological depth. Through its wrenching dissonances and echoes between the vocal soloists and chorus, one can hear the sheer force of God's voice as it seizes Saul's spirit.

The journey ended where it began: with Monteverdi. His "Gloria a 7 voci" was mercurial and rhythmically adept — an entire spiritual universe unto itself. Happily, the chorus, ensemble, and conductor saved their best work for the end.