

# The Cantata Singers Opens its 50th Season

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by Charles Warren , September 25, 2013.



The Cantata Singers.

The Cantata Singers, one of Boston's most cherished musical organizations, opened its 50<sup>th</sup> season September 20<sup>th</sup> at Jordan Hall with a presentation of its very first program from all those years ago: three Bach cantatas. The audience was large, and people were issued ribbons of various colors to indicate how many years one went back with the organization. Many loyal audience members were present, former singers and musicians with the group, and people otherwise involved in its support and management. There was a feeling of love in the air.

50 years ago Bach's cantatas were not well known or much recorded. Those who became the Cantata Singers got together at first in a Boston Unitarian church simply to sing and work on this material and see what it was like. (The group's first music director, Leo Collins, was present at the current concert and took a bow to warm applause.) Over the years the group has publicly performed much of the Bach cantata canon, as well as the larger Passions and B-Minor Mass, and the work of

other composers from Monteverdi and Schütz to Bach's contemporaries, Mozart and Beethoven, Brahms, Verdi, Vaughan Williams, Stravinsky and other 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers, and indeed new works commissioned by the group. It premiered John Harbison's *Flight into Egypt*, which won a Pulitzer Prize, and Donald Sur's *Slavery Documents*, among numerous other commissioned works. Many of the most ambitious undertakings — I remember a great St. Matthew Passion and *Missa Solemnis*, for example — have been led by current music director David Hoose, who goes back 30 years now, and is an inspiring conductor with a sense of mission.

First on the current program, Bach's "*Aus der Tiefe rufe ich, Herr, zu dir*" dates from the composer's early twenties and is perhaps his first cantata — and is altogether affecting and masterful. A setting of the *De profundis* Psalm with lines interwoven from a 16-century Christian text, the piece cries out both to the Old Testament God and to Christ, reminding Him of his sacrifice and what it enables for the repentant. The opening chorus, "Out of the depths I call..." is subdued and sonorous, in slow three-quarter time. The large choir here was clear in enunciation and rhythm, well blended in sound, and altogether human, very much meaning the words they sang — and so it was all evening. The small ensemble of strings, oboe, and organ continuo sounded simply great — one will not hear better in Boston, with its rich early music scene, or anywhere. Orchestra and choir were very well balanced. In the second number, "If thus you choose, Lord, to account for sins, who could remain...you have atoned for them on the wood [cross]..." the voice making its appeal becomes a trinity of bass soloist, choir overlay, and oboe, three very different entities but at one — perhaps mirroring the divine Trinity. Dana Whiteside came forward on stage and sang passionately. Peggy Pearson made the oboe sing as eloquently as any human voice. In between two further choruses, tenor Eric Christopher Perry sang with a clear and even tone in another number mixing soloist and choir. This early work of Bach's has a seamless, flowing, through-composed quality and an evenness of mood, which the performers entered into and got just right.

After intermission came one of Bach's greatest pieces, the solo cantata "*Ich habe genug*," based on the Song of Simeon in Luke's Gospel, where a man welcomes death in ecstatic contemplation of his Savior and the peace of the beyond — though he does so with plenty of convincingly human twists and turns. It is an agony, a happy agony. Baritone James Maddelena, long familiar on the world opera and concert stage, put the work across very effectively. He struggled with notes in the high range, which dominates the opening aria, "I have enough, I have taken the Savior into my arms," and did not really have the very low notes of the range (of which there are not many in the piece). He showed effort in the long, slow, repetitious, sublime central aria, "*Schlummert ein*" ("Fall asleep, you weary eyes"), with its requirement of long breaths. But he used the effort to dramatic advantage. And Maddelena's voice in the middle is still very beautiful — rich and mahogany-toned, and no purely vocal surplus — it is all human, just enough voice, it seems, for a man and the soul. Most importantly, Maddelena made an imposing figure standing on the stage, his face concentrated and sincere, with its large expressive eyes. It was as if the Count from *The Marriage of Figaro* had come to his deathbed, confronting us with his newfound seriousness, and his pain, vulnerability, and longing for the consoling vision and the peace that he almost — but not quite — grasps. Again, the oboe is a second voice in this piece — another dimension to the man, perhaps the man transfigured as he longs to be — and Peggy Pearson's playing could not have been more soulful and expressive.

The concert closed with “*Alles nur nach Gottes Willen*” (“Everything according to God’s will alone”), which opens with a wild fast chorus where orchestra and choir tear off and tear along rapidly, often with wide intervals between sounds we hear simultaneously. It is one of those pieces that even when executed very accurately and on pitch — as it was here — sounds disconcertingly out of tune. That is the point. It is celebratory, but also sounds like universal chaos *wishing* it were governed by will, God’s or anybody’s. This was exciting, and one wished it had gone on longer — it would have made a great encore. The piece moves on to a more sober recitative, arioso, and aria, for alto — resolution to God’s will — which Lynn Torgrove delivered with her usual dramatic focus. Baritone James Dargan, strong-voiced and even, if a bit nasal-sounding, sang the ensuing recitative that is a rousing imperative to believe, leading into the affirmative soprano aria “My Jesus will do it” (the German sounds better, “*Mein Jesus will es tun*”). Lynch has a strong but boyish voice, with easy high notes — we might say angelic. The cantata closes with the calm, swelling chorale “*Was mein Gott will, das g’scheh allzeit*” (“What my God wills always occurs”), where again we could enjoy the group’s burnished sound, straight from the heart.

So, a fine celebration of decades of good work. The season continues with performances of Monteverdi’s great Vespers of 1610, Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*, and the premiere of Harbison’s *Supper at Emmaus*, along with more Bach and other Baroque era music. Let’s be there.

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