

MUSIC REVIEW

Cantata Singers look back to open 50th

By David Weininger | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 23, 2013

“A new performing choir — a good one — is the Cantata Singers.” That was the verdict of Margo Miller, writing in the Globe the day after the group’s Nov. 15, 1964, debut. The name was also a mission statement: Its first program, under the direction of organist and conductor Leo Collins, was made up of three Bach cantatas, few of which were then in regular circulation.

Perhaps the most telling observation in Miller’s review was that “the accomplishments of the choir are lightness and gusto when needed.” The Cantata Singers have gone on to accomplish much in the ensuing five decades, reaching across a wide span of choral and instrumental works new and old. But the ability to balance agility and opulence — lightness and gusto — has remained its calling card, especially in Bach.

The group opened its 50th-anniversary season by reprising that debut program. It was both a nostalgic tour and a measure of the distance between then and now.

“Aus der Tiefen” (BWV 131), an early cantata, opened the program. The small orchestra had a sumptuous sound unlikely to have been equaled on that first evening. The chorus did the lion’s share of the singing, its full sound becoming a bit blurry during more energetic moments. Bass Dana Whiteside captivated during his solo aria, as he usually does. Tenor Eric Christopher Perry had a sweet, appealing tone, though his phrasing was somewhat stiff.

For the solo cantata “Ich habe genug” (BWV 82), the group brought in the eminent baritone James Maddalena, who has given a slew of great Bach performances in Boston over the years. It was a fitting nod to Cantata Singers’ history. Time, however, seems to have taken its toll on Maddalena’s voice, which was patchy, and he audibly strained

to reach notes high in his range. For all that, the performance was riveting, especially during the famous “Schlummert ein” aria. Maddalena’s ability to plumb the text’s dramatic depths remains undimmed, and even seemed more poignant here. No small factor in the performance’s success was the sensitivity and precision of the orchestra’s playing. Oboist Peggy Pearson, a Cantata Singers stalwart, was simply brilliant throughout.

The opening of “Alles nur nach Gottes Willen” (BWV 72) featured the most remarkable choral singing of the evening, the group tossing off Bach’s relentless, agitated lines as though they were warmup exercises. It is an odd beginning for a piece about the solidity of faith, but it made the closing chorale seem all the more resolute. Of the three vocal soloists, soprano Lisa Lynch stood out for the lithe elegance of her singing. (The others were alto Lynn Torgove and bass James Dargan.)

Among the individuals whom music director David Hoose recognized from the stage were the late John Grimes, Cantata Singers’ longtime timpanist, and Leo Collins himself, who was present to take a well-deserved bow for starting this invaluable group on its journey.

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