After a big anniversary, the Cantata Singers and music director David Hoose opened their 51st season on Saturday doing what they do best. Two of J. S. Bach’s church cantatas, the heart of the group’s mission (and name), surrounded another specialty, a
premiere, of Elena Ruehr’s “Eve.” But the program also ingeniously highlighted a transaction underpinning preaching and musical performance: instruction and understanding.

Bach’s “Du sollt Gott, deinen Herren, lieben” (BWV 77) meticulously musicalizes the challenge of grasping and following divine command. The opening, enveloping chorus and a stentorian recitative (by bass Mark Andrew Cleveland) offered imperative varieties, but other, lighter-voiced soloists (soprano Hannah McMeans, tenor Eric Christopher Perry, and alto Carola Emrich-Fisher) communicated more fragile faith, especially in the aspirational dance between Emrich-Fisher and Terry Everson’s stratospherically high, delicate trumpet obbligato.

Ruehr’s telling of Eve and the apple in the Garden of Eden provocatively ends before Adam and Eve’s banishment, turning a tale of hubris into one of enlightenment: “The eyes of them both were opened.” The music hints at a more cyclical conception. The orchestral opening superimposes harmonic categories — major and minor, anticipation and resolution — into dissonant clouds; after the fateful bite, the chorus drives to a ringing minor-key cadence only to return to that initial ambiguity: a back-and-forth of grim certainty and known unknowns. (The chorus was especially excellent in those final phrases, precisely modulating from hymn-like solidity to intricately-voiced disquiet.) Eve (soprano Farah Darliette) and the serpent (bass Will Prapestis) refrain from dramatic heights, as if still finding their allegorical roles.

Both score and performance likewise rationed grand moments, keeping the story’s apocalyptic reputation in restrained check. “Eve” is a reflective fable, thoughtful rather than fierce. The provocation turned out to be unusually, effectively clement.

No such restraint marked Bach’s wedding cantata “Dem Gerechten muß das Licht” (BWV 195); Hoose presided over extravagant spectacle and immoderate beauty. An avuncular celebrant (bass Dana Whiteside) rumbled with florid praise; an alto aria (sung bewitchingly by Jennifer Webb) happily savored its own dreamy elegance; a quartet (Webb, Perry, Cleveland, and soprano Lisa Lynch) swirled in and out of the chorus’s crowd of clarion-toned revelers. The cantata programmatically echoed the marriage at the center of Ruehr’s
tale: Adam and Eve, joined for better and for worse. But the performance’s sheer ebullience seemed to reverse the causality of that first couple’s legacy, history’s greatest theological hangover answered by a hell of a party.

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