Cantata Singers Discovers New Auditorium

by BMINT STAFF

This fall, arts venues across the city of Boston have been threatened with closure. Yet amongst all these disappointing announcements, an interesting theater is about to emerge from years of well-kept secrecy.

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge has quietly and privately been sponsoring lively lectures and occasional concerts for over 200 years—the last 35 in its award-winning and very handsome, somewhat Japenoisish Kallmann, McKinnel & Wood designed clubhouse. What's perhaps most remarkable about the interior of the space is the wall of letters from the members, including the likes of Thomas Jefferson. The news prompting this notice is the Cantata Singers' expansion of its chamber series in the Academy's 225-seat Norton's Woods Center. Three concerts will take place in the venue over the course of the season. The first, "Made in America," will take place on Thursday, November 17, 2015 at 7:30pm.

*BMInt* conducted an email interview with David Hoose.

You recently discovered the AAAS building and auditorium....who approached whom and how did this new series come about? Why did the club decide to go public in this way?

The partnership between the Academy and Cantata Singers began organically. A number of people involved with Cantata Singers, including Ed Kravitz, Yehudi Wyner, and Christoph Wolff, are all Academy members. During a CS concert, one of them mentioned the merits of the space, so we visited the hall, had a conversation with the Academy about its goal of presenting more music—it has a distinguished musical history that, in more recent times, was not as present—and it became clear that presenting our three Chamber Series concerts would be marvelous for both organizations.

"We are delighted that our Chamber Series has found a new home at the Academy's remarkable 225-seat Norton's Wood's Center Auditorium in Cambridge, an undiscovered high-quality music venue with stunning acoustics," said David Hoose, Cantata Singers' Music Director. The auditorium is no doubt handsome in the modern sense and very comfortable, and it possesses unobstructed sightlines, but like most fan shaped theaters, it is quite dead. Great for lectures with amplification, but exceedingly dry. Have you heard anyone sing there?

It's a bit of "each to his own." I think the hall's sound is clear and present. It's not on the reverberant side, but that quality be advantageous to understanding singers' words! The baritone David Kravitz (whose father, Ed, may have been the person who brought the hall to our attention) and the pianist Bob Levin both recently presented recitals there. The success of these and other recent concerts suggests something of the hall's value as a performing space.

But, while we're talking about performing spaces, let's face the fact that Boston, unlike New York or London,
does not have a plethora of superb settings for concerts, ones that are comfortable for the audience, have excellent acoustics, house a first-class piano, and have a large enough space to be used as a stage. There are two, but only two, superb halls in the city, both of them increasingly busy and increasingly expensive. In London and New York, it’s often the churches that serve music-making well. But here, this church is too small, this one has resonant acoustics but makes the music sound distant, this one is heavily carpeted, this one has a heating system that makes intrusive noises, and so forth. So, we are grateful for this hall at the American Academy, as well as for our new relationship with the organization.

“This wonderful expansion and new relationship offers the opportunity for us to deepen our musical offering.” How so?

This partnership offers the platform to return to a three-concert chamber season. One of these three programs will be a concert for twelve singers and guitar, a program reaching from Machaut to Berio and presented in the exquisite foyer of the AAAS building. The other two will be solo and ensemble repertoire. For all three of these concerts, we’ll be giving pre-concert talks, something we’ve offered only as our larger programs. Before this first concert, Yehudi Wyner and I will give the talk.

You begin with a program of Americana. Is that in consequence of your host’s first name?

Not really, though I won’t argue with it. We are always interested in musical connections and relationships among composers and their music. For me, the connections may be entirely intuitive, an emotional or even sensory thread that ties things together into a coherent whole. I’m much less interested in “thematic programming,” a kind of programming that I think is easy to create but that often offers little more than the hook of an “idea.” Instead, I’m fascinated by connections and relationships that might exist on a level more below the surface. I think our program of Bach, Webern and Brahms from later this season might be one of the programs in which the whole is even greater than the sum of its parts—and the parts themselves are more than amazing.

But we’re also interested in creating connections between the Cantata Singers chamber concerts and the larger choral programs. And these cross-concert links are likely to be more straightforward. This first program of Irving Fine, Aaron Copland and Samuel Barber picks up, reflects on, and focuses on some corners of our recent concert in Jordan Hall that was primarily American music, including music of these three.

It’s a more intimate look at their music through their solo songs and ensembles. Irving Fine’s music, for me, has the most wonderful way with words, whether it’s in Choral New Yorker or The Hour-Glass, or in the solo songs. They are elegant and eloquent in ways that little music of this era is, looser than the open-piano muscularity that Copland’s defined and, at the same time, utterly free of any sentimentality. For me, it’s the most interesting and honest music, true to its time and East coast vibrancy. (People may be interested in a reflection on Fine that appeared in the New York Times on the occasion of his recent 100th birthday. If nothing else, there is a touching and amusing photo of Lukas Foss, Harold Shapero and Fine at Tanglewood in 1946.

Irving Fine is not as accessible as Copland or Barber. How did he get into the mix? How many of the composers were AAAS members?

If Fine’s music is not as accessible as Copland’s or Barber’s, it’s only because he wrote so little music. His dying in 1962, at the age of 47, only a couple of weeks after conducting the premiere of his Symphony, was a blow to the evolution of American music. In this last pieces, he began to open up new worlds for himself, deepening his already very personal and powerful voice. But even his very few compositions manage to put him at the forefront of American composers who were defining, along with Copland, what an American voice could be. This Chamber Series concert brings together the intimate side of all three of three composers’ music.

Then your subsequent concerts in the series are quite different. Anything to say in the way of a short
They, too, have musical connections to the choral programs. Amy Lieberman’s expansive program (February 26th) of very old and much newer music by Machaut, Janequin, Berio, Pärt and others hints at our presentation, in May, of the first Boston performance of Arvo Pärt’s Adam’s Lament, a recent, incredible work for chorus and string orchestra. He, too, seems to be going in new directions. The earliest music on her program also suggests—believe it or not—something of the intense expression of Anton Webern, whose music appears later in the company of Bach and Brahms.

And Allison Voth’s program on March 15th makes the most direct connection to our upcoming exploration of the Brahms German Requiem. The Brahms and Mendelssohn songs and chamber music on this concert also spin out of our fairly recent performance of Mendelssohn’s Elijah.

And I gather the format of the series includes receptions. Tell us more about that aspect of the collaboration.

I’ve always thought that a hallmark of Cantata Singers was that its audience came to listen, but I suppose a bit of post-concert refreshment opens all kinds of ears.

Also please tell us more about the regular series of the Cantata Singers. Where is that excellent ensemble headed in this chorus saturated environment?

There’s always an important place for marvelous music, especially when the programming is responsive to the inner life of the music and when the performances search for the heart of the music. These are qualities Cantata Singers has always strived toward, and I hope we get there often.

Handel’s astoundingly creative and moving Israel in Egypt, in the seldom heard complete three—part version lies ahead in January. We usually hear only two-thirds of this oratorio, the entire first part lobbed off and thwarting the music’s dramatic journey. By restoring the first part, a lamentation of the Israelites, Handel’s vivid depiction of the plagues that follows—sometimes terrifying, sometimes downright hilarious—finally makes sense. We will perform Israel in Egypt twice, once in newly restored Cary Hall in Lexington, and two days later in Jordan Hall.

After that, our program of Bach Cantata BWV 60, a “Dialogue between Hope and Fear,” next to Webern’s hair-raising Movements for String Orchestra, might throw the Brahms Requiem into a new relief. Whenever we’ve performed the Brahms, we’ve juxtaposed it with music—the Schoenberg Kammersymphonie, or the Busoni Berceuse élégiaque and the Weill Violin Concerto—that somehow finds its way into the heart of the Brahms, without undermining the beautiful unfolding of the opening of the Requiem. Usually, I don’t want to hear any choral singing before this magical opening, but the chorale at the close of Cantata 60, the forward-reaching chorale that Alban Berg quotes in his Violin Concerto, opens a new doorway to the Brahms.

The last concert of the season brings together Bach’s luminous A-major Mass, the motet Komm, Jesu, komm, and Pärt’s Adam’s Lament in ways that I think may show, as much as anything we do, who Cantata Singers has always been.
Made in America: Songs by Barber, Copland, and Fine

Allison Voth, *Chamber Series Director*

Tues, Nov 17, 2015 / 7:30pm
American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 136 Irving Street, Cambridge

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