

Cantata Singers — A Soul-Stirring Performance » The Arts Fuse

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David Hoose and the Cantata Singers — during the performance of the Rachmaninoff “All-Night Vigil” in January, 2015. Photo: James Luo.

By Susan Miron

In six years of reviewing concerts, I have been consistently impressed by the [Cantata Singers](#) under Music Director David Hoose. Friday night at Boston’s Jordan Hall, the Cantata Singers’ chorus and instrumental ensemble performed a soul-stirring *Eine Deutsche Requiem* by Brahms and three shorter pieces by Bach and Anton Webern. To say I was deeply moved — twice to tears — by the *Requiem* gives some indication of just how fresh and moving this profound seven-movement masterpiece felt to

someone who has known and loved this piece her whole life.

The evening began with a lecture by the Boston luminary and Pulitzer Prize- and McArthur Genius Grant-winning composer John Harbison, who led the Cantata Singers in the early 1970s. There was a frightening moment at the start of the evening; he fell backwards from the piano bench onto the floor. A few moments later Harbison was playing Bach, and explaining the interconnections — not obvious at first sight — among the pieces by Brahms, Webern, and Bach in the evening's program. He discussed how the pieces Hoose chose made illuminating sense together: Webern's Orchestration of J.S. Bach's "Fuga (Ricercar a 6 voci)" from *The Musical Offering*; Bach's Cantata BWV 60, "O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort;" and Anton Webern's Five Movements for String Orchestra. It was heady stuff.

Harbison mentioned that if one only went to orchestra programs, such as those of the Boston Symphony, one might go a whole season hearing nothing by Webern, who fell into concert oblivion after the 1960s, or Bach, who has been banished in large part to the world of Early Music. To Harbison, that is a loss: "The Five Movements for Orchestra" (Opus 5) is a fully expressed piece of atonal music, he argued. "Webern's non-tonal language was very brilliantly compressed, which works well for his very short statements, his radical 'momentariness.'"

Webern's orchestration of Bach, "Fuga (Ricercar) a 6 voci" (No. 2 from *The Musical Offering*) opened the program, and it contains hints of the composer's late, rarified compositions, such as the Concerto for 9 Instruments. J.S. Bach's Cantata BWV 60, "O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort" is known in English as his "Dialogue between Fear and Hope" (although the strict German translation would be 'O Eternity, You Word of Thunder'). The alto's solo "Fear, singing of the fear of death, the last pain" was performed by the lavishly gifted singer, cantor, and stage director Lynn Torgove, who was initially covered up by the orchestra, but who soon was heard to beautiful effect. The tenor, Eric Christopher Perry, (Artistic Director of Boston's professional male vocal ensemble, Renaissance Men) sang "The fire of suffering is hot but so be it! It purifies me to the praise of God" with great energy and brio. Hoose writes about this piece: "The argument of two sides of the same heart and mind, one terrified of the grave, the other ever trusting, reaches through the entire cantata. Only when an external power intervenes is Fear's doubt quelled, but the final choral contribution leaves open the door to more doubt or — more likely — the unknown beyond." This was a powerful performance.

This excellence came as no surprise. Many of the instrumentalists and singers have spent years together performing Bach cantatas at Emmanuel Church, and Bach has become part of their musical DNA. Curiously, four of the original members of the Naumburg Award-winning (1981) Emmanuel Wind Quintet — the horn player, now conductor Hoose, flutist Christopher Krueger, oboist Peggy Pearson, and clarinetist Bruce Creditor — were given a chance to perform together 35 years after their N.Y. debut (when they played Harbison's 1978 Wind Quintet). Other singers have been part of the Cantata Singers chorus for decades. This is a large group performers accustomed to playing and singing together — and does this invaluable experience show!

Webern's Five Movements for String Orchestra was orchestrated two decades after the composition began life as a string quartet. The quirky music seems to elicit an almost psychoanalytic interpretation. It's so evanescent, compressed, alarming, and action-packed — the whole surreal shebang is over before you know it. Schoenberg famously said Webern's music could evoke a novel in a sigh. I was especially happy to hear this piece because it has been such a long time; I last heard it while in music school, another life ago. I mourn the neglect of his compelling music, and thank Hoose for including it on this program inspired by themes of loss and the eternal. Webern's is *seriously* difficult music, but this orchestra played it with ease, accuracy, and passion.

The size of both the orchestra and chorus doubled after intermission for the *Requiem*, which consists of the composer's own selection of sacred texts from the Lutheran Bible, chosen to provide comfort for the living rather than to evoke memories of the departed. Brahms, whom Harbison described as "an isolated and difficult person," took some ten years to complete this *Requiem*, which he began in earnest shortly after his mentor Robert Schumann drowned in the Rhine. As early as 1854, the time when he was helping Clara Schumann during her husband's illness, Brahms had sketched a funeral march as the middle movement of a projected symphony — the march was incorporated into the *Requiem*. Brahms was deeply affected by the death of his beloved mother in February 1865, which unquestionably played a part in his thoughts as he composed this memorial work, particularly the *Requiem's* fifth movement, "Ich hab nun Traurigkeit." The third movement, "Herr, lehre doch mich," introduces the bass soloist, Mark Andrew Cleveland. His part ponders the meaning of life, with the chorus offering compelling reiterated commentary, as if the singers were a Greek chorus. Cleveland, a bass with a absolutely gorgeous voice, provided some of the evening's most stunning singing, both here and in the sixth movement "Denn wir haben hier kein bleibende Statt." Soprano soloist Majie Zeller sang with great beauty and grace in the fifth movement, a musical monument to Mother Love. Both singers, who have been in the Cantata Singers a very long time, were — for this listener — the highlights of the evening.

There was no question that Hoose loves these four pieces. The chorus was meticulously prepared, and sounded wonderful. Several of the instrumentalists were praiseworthy — cellist Rafael Popper-Kaizer, flutist Christopher Krueger, oboists Peggy Pearson and Jennifer Slowik, horn player Whitacre Hill, and timpanist Robert Schulz. The Cantata Singers are a group whose performances should not be missed.

Susan Miron, a harpist, has been a book reviewer for over 20 years for a large variety of literary publications and newspapers. Her fields of expertise were East and Central European, Irish, and Israeli literature. Susan covers classical music for *The Arts Fuse* and *The Boston Musical Intelligencer*. She is part of the Celtic harp and storytelling duo A Bard's Feast with renowned storyteller Norah Dooley and, until recently, played the Celtic harp at the Cancer Center at Newton Wellesley Hospital.

