Concert Review: Cantata Singers Perform “Missa solemnis”

MARCH 20, 2018 — LEAVE A COMMENT

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Cantata Singers at NEC’s Jordan Hall, conducted by David Hoose, Music Director. Photo: Michael McVey.

By Susan Miron

A bulk email from conductor David Hoose reached me shortly before the Cantata Singers performed last Friday evening: “I hope you’ll be able to hear this Cantata Singers performance of Beethoven's amazingly and crazily beautiful Missa solemnis, tomorrow evening in Jordan Hall. The soloists — Dana Varga, Emily Marvosch, Yeghishe Manucharyan, and Mark Andrew Cleveland—the chorus, and the orchestra all sound quite stunning, and this could be a very special performance.”

For once, an organization’s advance word fell short. This performance was far more than special and crazily beautiful — it was extraordinary. After covering close to a dozen Cantata Singers concerts, the power of their presentations no longer surprise. The accumulation of artistic forces are formidable: a first-rate chorus, stellar soloists, some of Boston’s best instrumentalists and, most importantly, conductor David Hoose, an insightful, dedicated conductor who has led this ensemble for 35 years.

What continually impressed me during the hour and a half performance were Hoose's superb conducting and the four impressive vocal soloists. I’ve enjoyed hearing bass Mark Andrew Cleveland
twenty years. I wasn’t familiar with the tenor, Yeghishe Manucharyan, whose contributions to the evening were stunning. What a beautiful voice! The marvelous contralto Emily Marvosh sang gloriously throughout, and soprano Dana Varga contributed many memorable moments of beauty.

Cantata Singers have sung this piece before (in 1995 and 2001), although revivals does not make this ambitious composition any less arduous to perform. Hoose’s program notes were spot-on in detailing the daunting physical and spiritual hurdles faced by the singers.

“The reckless vocal writing — stratospheric soprano lines and impractically deep bass writing, careening twists of character, Olympian leaps, and a demand for undying physical, mental, and emotional energy — all are metaphors for Beethoven’s own personal and artistic struggles... But the challenges of Missa solemnis are not easily obscured, not should they be, for their naked presentation places the performer directly at the intersection of the composer’s aspirations, frustrations, anger, and exultation.”

Conductor Hoose started out as a horn player freelancer in the Emmanuel Wind Quintet, which won the prestigious Naumberg Award in 1981. It was touching to see three of the other original quintet members — flutist Christopher Kruger, oboist Peggy Pearson, clarinetist Bruce Creditor — were all in the orchestra, playing superbly, as did horn player Whitacre Hill, bassoon Ron Haroutunian, contrabassoon Margaret Phillips, trumpet player Fred Holmgren, trombonist Michael Tybursky, and the ever-excellent timpanist Robert Schulz. The 20 minute “Sanctus” includes a virtuoso violin concerto, a rather unexpected presence in a Mass, played here by concertmaster Danielle Maddon. Ordinarily, the “Praeludium” had been associated with congregational silence during the elevation of the host, filled with a quietly improvising organ.

The chorus rose, like the soloists, to Beethoven’s daunting challenges with panache and skill, particularly the loud and unsingable passages in each voice’s upper register. Most likely, listeners are familiar with this piece from recordings, but hearing and watching the composition played live helps make the Mass’s drama far easier to follow and to appreciate. The thick counterpoint of Beethoven’s many fugues is much easier to understand when the sections of the four-part chorus are singing in front of you. For me, one of the instrumental highlights was the soaring violin solo, played deftly by Maddon.
Beethoven's staggeringly beautiful work is also a plea for inner and outer peace. The composition is a setting for the traditional Catholic Liturgy, but its herculean scope reached further than any Mass before it had dared. Beethoven's relationship with the church could be described as... complicated. His personal brand of Christianity was not particularly devout, but it was progressive, asking for an intimate and direct connection to the Divine. Beethoven distills this belief in the Missa solemnis, his epic celebration of life and spirituality. As Hoose explains in this notes: “To be open to this Promethean musical testimony is to be drawn into the composer’s own existential striving, and ultimately back into our own.”

Written between 1819 to 1823, when he was also writing the Ninth Symphony, Beethoven agonized and tinkered over this immense “crown of my life's work,” telling many of his patrons and publishers that its premiere would be “the most glorious day of my life.” Yet it remained unpublished until the composer’s death in 1827: he never heard a complete performance. It was dedicated to the Archduke Rudolph of Austria, his friend, piano and composition student, and patron, to whom he had already dedicated the piano sonatas “Les Adieux” and “Hammerklavier,” the “Grosse Fugue,” and the Fourth and Fifth piano concertos. Intended to celebrate Rudolph’s ascension to the position of Archbishop of Olmütz (now in the Czech Republic), the Missa missed (by several years) the occasion of his installation. On the first page of the score, Beethoven inscribed these words of hope: “From the heart — may it again — to the heart: (“For Herzen — “Möge es wilder- Zu Herzen gehen!”).

Beethoven biographer Jan Swafford insists that Missa solemnis is ultimately a work of faith: “Beethoven's personal faith as an individual reaching toward God, not an assertion of the credos and dogmas of the Holy Roman and Apostolic Church... He goes beyond doctrine into a unique mingling of faith, spirituality, and humanism. Ultimately the Missa solemnis is a statement of faith and also of doubt, beyond the walls of any church. From the heart, may it go to the heart — person to person, without priests. The Missa solemnis is Beethoven's cathedral in sound.” The building erected by the Cantata Singers, Hoose, and their four soloists was impressive, often breathtaking, offering up ninety minutes of peace — the large audience was deeply appreciative.

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.

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