

The Boston Musical Intelligen

a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston

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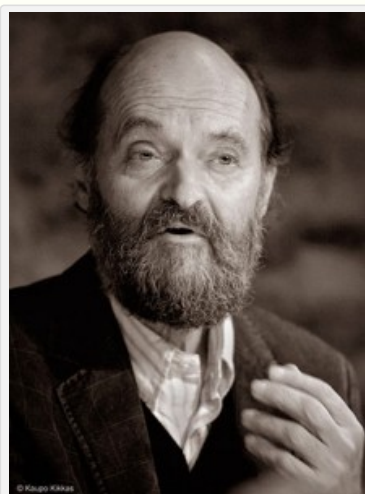
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Faire Be the Cantata Singers

by SUSAN MIRON



Arvo Pärt (Laupo Kikkas photo)

Extraordinarily beautiful music we rarely hear, Tomás Luis de Victoria's *Officium Defunctorum*, Arvo Pärt's *Berliner Messe*, and William H. Harris's *Faire is the Heaven*, closed Cantata Singers' 54th season.

Every few years I experience something very rare at the always satisfying Cantata Singers's concerts, that sears itself into my ears, and yes, soul. It happened three years ago at Wellesley College's Houghton Chapel [\[HERE\]](#) with Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil*, and again, this Sunday afternoon at Boston's L. C. Tiffany extravaganza, the Church of the Covenant, while listening to Tomás Luis de Victoria's *Official Defunctorum*, both lengthy otherworldly experiences. The whole concert was astonishingly moving, full of grace and beauty, music- and singing- at its most extraordinary. The singers were their usual superb selves, as a choir and individually. Ten were given solo turns; I was particularly struck by Jennifer Webb's exquisite delivery. The audience and I simply sat there wowed by the music's sheer beauty, and the elegance of the expert singing. Hoose nicely describes the "Officium" as "music that breathes with subtle inflections, nuanced character and quietly expressed emotion... infused with elegant wonders."

Hoose and his singers deftly navigated the shoals of Victoria's intricate vocal writing, which the engaging pre-concert lecturer, William Cutter, explained "fooled around with cross relationships," and was chock full of accidentals, alterations of pitches for expressivity (say, to express mourning), and (horrors!) besmirched counterpoint, rather than, for example, Palestrina's "squeaky clean harmony." Victoria would, for example, use an augmented triad to express weeping. Fancy shop talk aside, the Victoria was one of my most treasured discoveries in nine years of music reviewing in Boston.

Of Pärt deeply spiritual, *Berliner Messe*, Hoose writes:

Pärt's music was atonal and dense; its resemblance to the European composers like Shnittke and Sofia Gubaidulina. His music's "formalist tendencies"- rejection of socialist realism, strict adherence to twelve-toe music, and experimentation with collage techniques" pus his overt embrace of Orthodox Christianity, proclaimed in his 1968 "Credo," that led to a ban of his music and for many years his name disappeared from Soviet lists of composers. After the fall of the USSR, theorist Yuri Kholopov allowed that 'God and Jesus Christ were bigger enemies to the Soviet regime than Boulez or Webern.'

What followed from the late 1960s until the early 1970s were Pärt's silent, reclusive years, from which he emerged with a new, numinous harmonic language characterized by widely spaced pitches, open intervals, an absence of chromaticism, and dissonance created through diatonic means or by carefully constructed tone clusters, as well as a technique, tintinnabuli, that applies various inversions of a chord so as to evoke the pealing of bells with rich unfolding overtones. During his years of quiet, Pärt studied Gregorian chant, music of Renaissance music of Victoria, Lassus, and Palestrina, and his two Renaissance counterparts, Pärt's post-1976 works seem endowed with a numinous quality which makes some listeners feel transported ecstatically outside of the confines of time.

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Hoose goes on to describe the *Officium* as “music that breathes with subtle inflections, nuanced character and quietly expressed emotion... infused with elegant wonders.” Nicely said. It speaks directly to Victoria’s Requiem, making them perfect when played back to back.

Faire Is the Heaven (1925) is the towering masterpiece of English composer, conductor, and organist Sir William Henry Harris (1883-1973), set to poetry of Edmund Spenser (c. 1552-1599), from a “Hymn of Heavenly Beauty” (1596).

Faire is the heav’n where happy soules have place. In full enjoyment of felicitie;

*Whence they doe still behold the glorious face
Of the Divine Eternall Majestie;*

Yet farre more faire be those bright Cherubins Which all with golden wings are overdight. And
those eternall burning Seraphins
Which from their faces dart out fiery light;*

*Yet fairer than they both, and much more bright, Be th’ Angels and Archangels which attend
On God’s owne Person without rest or end.*

*These then in faire each other farre excelling, As to the Highest they approach more neare. Yet is the
Highest farre beyond all telling*

*Fairer than all the rest which there appear, Though all their beauties joynd together were; How
then can mortall tongue hope to expresse The image of such endless perfectnesse?*

The two four-part choirs are mostly treated antiphonally, each group responding to music sung by the other, as Harris reserves the full power of eight voices for moments that are either especially dramatic (as at “fiery light” and “each other far excelling”) or peacefully sacrosanct (“God’s own person”, “endless perfectness”). The audience loved this piece, clapping so persistently that they were treated to a repeat performance. Concerts don’t get much more moving than this one.

Susan Miron is a book critic, essayist, and harpist. She writes about classical music and books for The Arts Fuse. Her last two CDs featured her transcriptions of keyboard music of Domenico Scarlatti.

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