

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

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Betrothal of Bach and Harbison

by LEE EISEMAN



John Harbison some time ago

The establishment institutions of Bach, the nearly 80-year-old John Harbison, and the 55-year-old Cantatas Singers shared the Jordan Hall stage for a memorable Saturday evening which placed the Boston composer's *Sacred Trilogy* (together for the first time) in company with one of the Leipzig master's Lutheran cantatas. Clearly conductor David Hoose posits a strong connection between the two composers in the setting of biblical texts. And by asking for little obvious change in the sonorities or performance practice from the orchestra and singers to distinguish between works separated by 280 years, he posited the timelessness of the composer's impulses, or at least their adaptability.

The evening began with Bach, the wellspring of nearly every composer who has followed. Hoose tells us that:

Much of the joy of the cantata "Wachet auf," BWV 140 has roots in the stirring chorale melody that Bach chose as the basis for three of the cantata's movements, a tune and words written in 1599 by Philipp Nicolai. His melody is robust and assuring, and its bold shape, powerful leaps, a wide range, and dramatic

pauses have made fertile material for many composers. To J. S. Bach, it was a matchless source, and he turned to it only once.

Each of the cantata's three chorale movements sets a verse of Nicolai's hymn, words referring to the parable, as found in the Book of Matthew, about the young virgins who have variously prepared for, and not prepared for, the bridegroom's arrival. The cantata's solo movements—two recitatives and two duets—are on texts by an unknown author, and they draw liberally on the "Song of Solomon," with wedding allusions that were used by Jesus in his preaching to portray the kingdom of God and to identify himself as the "Bridegroom." The often-erotic tone of words associating earthly love with divine union create an excited, charged atmosphere.

Though Hoose described Bach's beloved cantata, as embracing an expectant "hope virtually untouched by anxiety," he led a take rather devoid of joy and excitement, within a narrow dynamic and emotional range, albeit one executed with care and precision. After the orchestra's bouncy introduction, the first chorale unfolded with creamy smooth tone, long legato lines and Peggy Pearson's star-level oboe filigree.

Michael Merullo stepped out of the chorus (as did all the soloists) to announce in tones of bright wonder the coming of the bridegroom as a young stag. With a bit more stamina, he could manage the role of the evangelist in a Bach Passion.

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The third section, a wondrous duet over organ (Michael Beattie) and cello (Lynn Nowells) continuo with exuberant violin obbligato from concertmaster Daniella Maddon, gave bright-grooved soprano Karyl Ryczek and boisterous yet polished baritone Mark Andrew Cleveland the opportunity to dialog on the coming of the sacrament.

If the central tenor chorale, "Zion hears," reminds you of the ear worm "Sleepers' Awake," BWV 645, be not surprised. In this instance the tenor section nailed the counterpoint with the strings and organ but could have found a bit more Ho! in their Hosannas.

Cleveland then intoned a recitative purging the soul of pain before he participated in the interminable burbling Baroque betrothal duet with Ryczek. Take away the singers and you have a stately dance with oboe, bassoon (Jensen Ling) and organ—all delivered with lively smiles.

The final chorale, announcing glory and jubilation in the text, and promising to "ring out as if from heaven's spaciousness," in Hoose's words, fell a bit short of the requisite closing grandeur. For some reason, we would have to wait until the second half to hear the chorus emote at full bore.

Clearly the spells that Bach, Harbison, Hoose and Cantata Singers cast on one another drove the expectations to great heights for the first conjoined performance of Harbison's *Sacred Trilogy*. Word has it that Harbison was active and inspiring in the rehearsals and that he was moved by the results. Harbison composed the constituent works between 1986 and 2014 for Cantata Singers, in the case of the first two, while receiving a joint-commission with CS and with Emmanuel Music for the third, *The Supper At Emmaus*. For *The Flight Into Egypt*, Harbison received the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Music.

Harbison's well-documented affinity for Bach may have been capstoned by Saturday's performance and the arrival of his book, *What Do We Make of Bach?* His notes on the three works are a must-read along with Hoose's appreciation [[HERE](#)].

Flight Into Egypt, the most pictorial and descriptive portion of the cycle, begins as Peggy Pearson with her stand partner Jennifer Slowick sets up baritone Brian Church, a really engaged and resourceful pro, for a theatrical announcement of Joseph's dream. Soprano Alexandra Whitfield and then, finally, for the first time, a fully engaged chorus, take turns explicating, while Beattie created some surprisingly powerful and unexpected 12-tone peals from the little Baroque continuo organ. After much colorful lamenting and weeping, the chorus sings of the arrival of the Nazarene with a wondrously swelling crescendo. And Pearson gets the last word. One wonders if Harbison had her in mind for the part so many years ago.

But Mary Stood: Sacred Symphony begins with a satisfyingly post-romantic overture for the strings that "shows us the way" to the acapella chorus "Let Not Your Heart be Troubled," which, on its own, could serve as a strikingly modern church motet. With clear tones but innocent of characterization, soprano Lisa Lynch wept over the sepulcher, until the chorus came in as the voice of Jesus calling out the single word, Mary," in a brief but telling heartbeat. "Touch me not," the chorus later cried out in a big choral moment with open fifths. Lynch came back to sum up the "Lord had spoken these things" with octave-jumping in perhaps a new style of church cantillation. A choral epilogue to "Charity Never Faileth went from pronouncement to freneticism to repose, finally intoning, "And now abideth faith, hope and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity." This motet provided the most intense sing of the night, in terms of tonal range, dynamics and directness of expression.

The Supper At Emmaus opens with a near tutti (except for brass), as agitated waves mount until a solo soprano shriek almost crucified us. There follows a *Historia* section with interlocking SATB solos and orchestral commentary. Buzzing, gossiping murmurs in the strings set the marketplace atmosphere for the arrival of Jesus, after which a long litany ensued (a bit reminiscent of the earlier Bach aria duo), again in the form of modern chanting. Alto Jennifer Webb embodied the style with particular radiance and conviction. The choral postlude, almost conjuring Veni, Veni Emmanuel, ended with a whimper to the words "...honor and glory forever and ever."

The bible readings Harbison chose have made inspiring subjects for literature, music, stained glass, and especially Cecil B. DeMille. If Harbison's classical impulse were more limbic than cerebral, and if the three works informed each other in ways that were more apparent, one might want to hear them played together again in a concert setting. Where do we want to hear them? Perhaps *the Flight* is the most dramatic, but its elaborate orchestration makes it impractical for worship settings, unlike *But Mary Stood* which would work perfectly in an Easter service.

The last words come from David Hoose:

In his book "What Do We Make of Bach," John speaks of Bach's "great synthesis of strict and free elements—law and fantasy—given and divined." John's music, too, is inventively systematic, its rigor shot with flexible imagination. The layers of relationships and powerful emotions that arise from such sophisticated thought,



Jesus and Mary M. appear to CB

always heard and always hearable, bring me back again and again.

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