Giving Thanks for Wyner and Hoose

by Mark DeVoto

It may be too early to make predictions about the year’s best, but the Cantata Singers’ concert at Jordan Hall on Friday night will likely rank as among the most interesting, exciting, and meaningful. Thoroughly American in character, it nevertheless partook of the eternal, beginning with Ives’s short, sensitive and emotionally enfolding bitonal setting (C major for the women, G minor for the men) of Psalm 67. A smaller group could not have improved on the clarity we heard from the 42 arrayed on stage; my only objection was that the B flat in the middle (maybe the first tenors?) did not come through.

Ives’s *General William Booth Enters Into Heaven*, in John J. Becker’s expertly martial orchestration arranged at Ives’s behest, provided the expected heartwarming Salvation-Army psalm of praise (with interpolated “Reveille”) on Vachel Lindsay’s uncanny rhythmic text; Brian Church sang the solo with might and projection, and when at moments he couldn’t be heard that was probably Ives’s intention. The heavy drumbeats, mostly in the strings, heralded more drumbeats to come in the work that followed.

*Give Thanks for All Things* by our own Yehudi Wyner, commissioned ten years ago by Cantata Singers, returned new and totally refreshing with some minor revisions. On a grand but human scale it invokes praise of God: before, after, and within—partly in psalms, partly in elegy.
Give Thanks for All Things possesses a remarkable fullness and clarity of the choral writing which both stands alone and combines perfectly with the orchestra in equal measure. Melodic lines between women and men are distinct and audible; there is an abundance of unison writing as well as parallel intervals and clear choral sound among the voices, supported from below rather than smeared from above as so often happens in recent choral-orchestra music. Elaborate vocal counterpoint doesn’t happen, and that is all to the good, because texts remain well articulated and clear, and a comprehensible harmonic organization regularly supports the melodic. The small orchestra comprises single winds, piano, harp, percussion, and strings 6-6-4-4-2; well-proportioned to the dimensions of the chorus, it sounded sufficiently massive and seldom overpowered.

Wyner organized it in eight movements, with the musician’s psalms, 148 and 150, framing the overall text at beginning and end. He gave a central position to Walt Whitman’s Civil War text, while also including a short poem by Richard Wilbur inspired by Psalm 150, an elegy from Dionysus Cato and Shakespeare, and a thrice-repeated refrain, “Dear Lord, be good to me. / The sea is so wide / and my boat is so small,” between other movements.

The outer psalm sections of the cantata shared some material, like the furious triplets in cellos at “Praise ye the Lord in the heavens.” The “stormy winds” of Psalm 148 were echoed by ponticello strings, the “winged bird” by a piccolo shriek. The “Hallelujah” (it does mean “Praise the Lord,” after all) was repeated by the chorus several times, mostly choral but with considerable unison, sometimes like a line of chant. Psalm 150, “with tambourines and dancing...with the clash of cymbals,” featured a lively jazz-like piano accompaniment; “...on the harp and lyre” had a five-times-repeated fanfare chord, a stack of thirds in the strings that had been heard in earlier movements, once in brass, and once in woodwinds. The final “Hallelujah” was in unison, as in the first movement, but dying away to pianissimo at the very.

In the third part, Wilbur’s text echoes these same psalms, began and ended with two chords, swinging back and forth like a bell, and framing an inverted-ninth harmony that was a favorite of Ravel. In between, “...at the right juncture, / Pandemonium,” the percussion burst out with a drum-tamtam cascade. A walking bass dominated the fourth movement, with texts from Dionysius Cato and Shakespeare ruminating on death; “Ay, but to die, and go we know not where” was a fortissimo choral unison that clutched the heart. Walt Whitman’s “Dirge for Two Veterans” speaks of drums and desperation, more effectively and rhythmically than his better-known “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d”. A heavy beat, sometimes faint, sometimes threatening, punctuated the orchestral background of this well-outlined text (“phantom moon” with cellos playing on the bridge; “great drums pounding” with trombone, plucked low strings, suspended cymbal with hard stick); brief vocal solos (Lynn Torgove, mezzo-soprano; Mark Andrew Cleveland, bass) made wounded cries in the wilderness.

The first of the three refrain statements began with a fortissimo trombone blast (was it on a G sharp, like the shattering sacrificial moment in Act II of Schoenberg’s Moses und Aron?), and then it was like a barcarolle in 12/8, partly imitative and seemingly senza misura, as though the chorus were getting seasick. The second time was also in a swaying 12/8, but with chorus partly unaccompanied and partly with muted strings; the third time was a soprano solo (sung with deep sensitivity by Felicity Salmon), gently supported by clarinet, bassoon, cello and harp, and surmounted by pianissimo violins in an upward-vanishing line.
If the different texts of the cantata speak to an unsettling variety of moods, between joyful praise and boundless grief, and desolate searching in between, the music brought everything together as a hymn of thanksgiving for living. The arc of emotion is wide, high, and deep, and very gratifying to the ear. This cantata needs to be recorded commercially and I hope we will hear it again soon.

Aaron Copland’s *Appalachian Spring*, in the original ballet version for 15 instruments, came across with expertise and affection. To most writers, the original version satisfies more aesthetically and intellectually than the revision, just as we find his Symphony for organ and orchestra superior to the version without the organ; furthermore, the newly-rediscovered ballet *Grohg* works better than the *Dance Symphony* extracted from it.

Irving Fine (1914-1962) died tragically before the fullness of his promise, which his mentor Copland described as “the greatest of us all,” and Fine’s mastery is evident in his instrumental music — there isn’t enough of it, and it all needs to be better known. His choral *The New Yorker (1944)*, on four nicely-chosen texts from the magazine of the 1920s and 30s, is far less-often heard than his easier *Alice in Wonderland* settings. The Cantata Singers gave us *The Choral New Yorker* in a version orchestrated by David Hoose from the piano original. The style is clearly influenced by Stravinsky via Copland’s mid-century idiom, and is immediately impressive for its incisiveness and clarity. Women sing the second song, men the third, the full chorus the first and fourth. There was whimsy as well as sadness in these four well-proportioned pieces, a satisfying wrapup to a first-rate concert.

David Hoose, in his 37th and apparently final year directing Cantata Singers, conducted with his usual skill and passion, having assembled works with originality and imagination. I’ve been observing him for decades; he uses a stick with the Cantata Singers, and omits it with Collage; in every case, first-rate performances emerge. Last night he earned bravos in every way — orchestrally, vocally, and especially for including Yehudi Wyner, still youthful at 90.

**Mark DeVoto**, musicologist and composer, is an expert in Alban Berg, also Ravel and Debussy. A graduate of Harvard College (1961) and Princeton (PhD, 1967), he has published extensively on these composers and many music subjects, most notably, harmony.