

REVIEW, TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2003

German anthem caps lustrous choral concert

Classical

Schola Cantorum on Hudson

Where and when: 4 p.m. Sunday, St. Cassian Church,
187 Bellevue Avenue, Upper Montclair, NJ

How much: \$15.

BY FRD KAIMANN for the STAR-LEDGER

At a concert of music from Germany, the **Schola Cantorum on Hudson** performed the German national anthem. How clichéd, you might think.

The rest of the music ranged from late medieval to very recent and was grouped into six sections by date or subject. But this was no cataloging exercise for overachieving music librarians. The selections gave this chorus a chance to show what it could . . . do with some of the most expressive music in the literature.

Part 1 was a tip-off: Three different settings of the plain chant “Christ is risen,” the first close to the medieval origin, the second a more updated version by Johann Eccard, the third a chorale by J.S. Bach. This opener filled the vaults of St. Michael’s Church in Jersey City with a pillowy, homogeneously blended sound from the men, grounded in the low register. The women . . . contributed evenly to the plain version. . . .

The next generation of sacred music, from the 19th century, was Schola Cantorum’s home. The chorus sized the intensity in an absorbing Brahms motet by ramping up the volume and returning to the pure sound from its initial blend. Mendelssohn’s “Heilig” motet was the best yet. Notice anything about these sections yet? Yes, they contained more than one composer and music of contrasting nature that showed connections between pieces and progress through the afternoon.

Conductor Deborah Simpkin King constructed a program of provocative depth, expansive breadth and sufficient length. Nothing was superficial, irrelevant or dull. Renaissance lieder contained happy, bright songs by Hassler, a longing piece by Isaac and two drinking songs. A 20th-century motet by Hugo Distler was thick with pure sounds, whereas his student Max Baumann’s “Our Father” setting layered contrasting tones that cast aside dissonance as it rose, cresting into harmony.

The last piece was the German national anthem, now making perfect sense at the end of the afternoon. The classical composer Haydn wrote the tune, and as a song it fit neatly between the realms of sacred and profane choral music sung earlier. It was actually no cliché. **It was careful contextualizing. And beautifully sung.**