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**North and South Jersey collaborate  
Svane premiere the common denominator**

Saturday, March 18, 2006

By Paul M. Somers

Lauda! Chamber Singers, Charles Walker (conductor), with guests Schola Cantorum on Hudson, Deborah Simpkin King (director). Carissimi: Jephthe Oratorio Latino; Randall Svane: Mass (first premiere). St. Stephen's Lutheran Church, Woodbury.

Saturday, March 23, 2006

Schola Cantorum on Hudson, Deborah Simpkin King (conductor), with guests Lauda! Chamber Singers, Charles Walker (director). Svane: Mass (second premiere); African-American Spirituals in the form of a Mass with music and/or arrangements by Hogan, Bagley, Harlan, Poch, Monk, and Wesby. St. Matthew Trinity Lutheran Church, Hoboken.

Randall Svane, a composer well-known in musical circles within New Jersey and well beyond, composed a *Mass* which required a particular vocal sound. In spite of its textural richness requiring eight part chorus and soloists, he wanted the pure sound and flexibility of execution one associates with a chamber ensemble. Because he lives in northern New Jersey it made sense for him to ask the Schola Cantorum on Hudson. But director Deborah Simpkin King, after a careful look at the score said she did not feel her smallish group would be effective when asked to sing the difficult score's eight parts.

So Mr. Svane was advised to approach the comparable southern New Jersey ensemble Lauda! Chamber Singers, based in Wenonah, with the idea of having them sing his *Mass* as a joint project with the Schola. Director Charles Walker agreed, and a collaboration was born which could and should be a model of how to expand audiences and bring to fruition large projects in New Jersey.

Both performances were labeled as premiers, though linguistic purists will insist upon Lauda's as the "real" thing because it came one week before Schola's. But that's quibbling; the project belonged to both first-rate groups and *someone* had to go first.

More importantly, both choral ensembles owned the music in an internal, spiritual sense. They struggled with it independently, then put it together during the afternoon before the first performance. The four soloists were drawn from the forces of the "home team."

Both groups' directors chose apt music to fill the other half of their programs.

Svane's *Mass* itself is a work of difficulty but one which singers from both choruses said falls into the category of "hard but well worth the work." He uses dissonances to mostly sweet or mystical affect. His climactic moments tend to resolve into \*triadic consonances. Often the score has the feel of dance, rollicking along.

Svane uses several of the elements which are historically associated with settings of the Mass: the contrasts between the "Kyrie" and "Christe" both of which in their own way evoked Gregorian Chant while extending into many voices, and the change of tempo between "Gloria" and "et in terra pax" (and on earth peace). In this latter he creates shimmering clusters in eight parts, as if peace is a glowing cloud of light. But soon the music returns to the dance, interrupted only by the "Lord God, Lamb of God". As would have been done in the baroque and subsequent periods the final section praising the Trinity is a monumental and joyous fugue.

Even before hearing the Credo's opening "Credo in unum deum" (I believe in one God), Svane's already heard incorporations of tradition into his modernist work led one to guess rightly that it would open with the singers in \*unison. All the phrases and words which have visual imagery are set with great care into sounds which suggest those pictures: the rich sound of the four part male chorus and the bright shining sound of eight part female chorus make distinctions within the text of "God the Father" and "Light of Light". Again a fugue concludes the movement.

Rather than the swinging six beats one often associates with a Sanctus, Svane creates a slow and mysterious aura - the holy as something otherworldly and not fully knowable. But it concludes with a joyous "Osanna" which is fully human.

For many in the audiences of both performances the Benedictus was their favorite movement. It gives the chorus a rest (an \*a cappella Mass is arduous work to sing) as the quartet of soloists is voiced so as to create a deep warmth within the clear texture. It is a most astonishing and affecting movement. The unisons in the final Agnus Dei are a reminder of ancient chant and that of the earlier Credo.

Each conductor had an independent view of the work. To paint with a broad brush, Walker's view was perhaps subconsciously informed by the work he programmed as the first half: Giacomo Carissimi's *Jephthe*, a slow, meditative work astride the late renaissance and the early baroque. Walker's *Mass* tempi were a touch slower, more informed by the mysterious Sanctus. King's was a vision which reminded me of Wilfred Mellar's description of Bach's music as "The Dance of God." Both visions were quite moving, and both made musical sense. And of course Walker found dance in the score and King found mystery. But the lasting impression of each was quite contrasted. What is important is to understand that Svane's *Mass* stands up well to differing interpretations, and that this is the sign of a resilient and worthwhile work.

Lauda! Chamber Singers began its concert with the rarely performed *Jephthe*. It proved to be like solemn source material for the deeply spiritual modern unfoldings of Gorecki and Pärt. The chorus glowed with an inner flame as it delivered the rich harmonies. The soloists were a mixed group. Tenor Thomas Faracco as Jephthe understood the style eloquently and made Carissimi's distinctions between major and minor quite clear. With some of the most \*chromatic writing of the evening, soprano Hjödrís Elín Lárusdóttir as Filia was secure and affecting in her role as the child to be sacrificed (as in the Greek tale of Idomeno and Idamante with its much happier ending).

The narration role of *Historicus* was sung by two voices, the secure and dramatic baritone John Andrew Fernandez and the too often insecure-of-pitch countertenor Michael G. Hegeman.

A week later Ms. King began the concert with Svane's *Mass* and concluded with an echo, as it were, in which she chose 16 Spirituals, each of which corresponded to a particular part of the text of the *Mass*. The arrangements were all quite effective, often well-known, and delivered with absolute security by the Schola Cantorum on Hudson singers. Though the many soloists were all effective, Gilberto Gomez was the audience favorite as he and the Schola let loose with *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit* which sequed directly into *I Know the Lord's Laid His Hands on Me*. The audience went cheered.

The collaboration certainly seemed to be productive, at least to this outsider. Everyone I talked to from both choruses seemed quite pleased to be paired with a group with which they shared a view of choral goals. What came across to several listeners was that each was clearly capable of doing the non-Svane part of the concert program of the other group.

Some expressed a desire to pair up with the other group again. This kind of linkage between north and south brought a degree of unity to our diverse state; it gave each organization a chance to be heard before a different audience; and quite importantly it gave Svane two performances of his important new *Mass*.

*Bravi tutti!!*