

Celebrating Christmas with Handel, Bach, Monteverdi and Charlie Brown

By David Gordon Duke, Special To The Sun December 9, 2013

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A Baroque Christmas: Vancouver Chamber Choir, Vancouver Chamber Orchestra, and Pacifica Singers

Orpheum Theatre, December 6, 2013

December is crammed with choral activities of every style and for every taste. This year, the Vancouver Chamber Choir has two projects: A Charlie Brown Christmas runs this weekend; while last Friday, the choir focused on baroque classics at the Orpheum.

Since the ensemble's inception, founder Jon Washburn has been steadfastly committed to the great choral repertoire. The anchor work of Friday's program was J.S. Bach's incomparable Magnificat, BWV 243 - not a particularly extended work, but one that gives full rein to Bach's rich imagination.

Augmented by members of the Pacifica Singers, the vocal forces were substantial, but with the requisite agility to negotiate Bach's florid passages brilliantly: the youthful men's voices of the Pacifica ensemble added an extra dollop of lustre and energy to the overall sound. A selection of singers drawn from within the choir were featured in solo and duet sections.

The orchestra (including a strong complement of players from the disbanded CBC Radio Orchestra) played on modern instruments; the overall sound reflected Washburn's pragmatic but informed manner with baroque repertoire.

The program's second half, for the Chamber Choir alone, was framed by the Gloria concertata of Monteverdi and Handel's grand anthem Blessed are They That Consider the Poor. Both composers were men of the theatre, and it showed. Monteverdi's Gloria was a cameo for Pacifica's conductor Kevin Zakresky, who made the most of contrasts between lithe dance elements and passages with dark, moody sonorities. The

Chamber Choir revelled in this luxurious music, rife with all the implicit drama associated with the early Baroque's greatest composer.

Handel's anthem was put together from bits and pieces from other works (including the Hallelujah Chorus from Messiah, tucked in for a splendid ending). As with the Magnificat, Washburn made sure the music was stylishly rendered, festive, and celebratory.

In between came the surprise of the evening, a selection of small-scale, seasonally appropriate pieces by Bach. Calm and intimate, they were astonishingly lovely. Sandwiched between the knowing sophistication of Monteverdi and Handel, they made a quiet but important point: Bach, pure and simple, is as elegant a composer as ever was.

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