

Bach Society 2011
Christmas Candlelight Concert

Review by John Huxhold

It was a mild Tuesday night a few days before Christmas, but a strong wind and the threat of rain made it seem all the more cozy inside Powell Hall for the annual Christmas Candlelight Concert by the Bach Society of Saint Louis. Like cookies, decorations, and crackling fireplaces, this concert is, for many, an essential part of the season.

There was, of course, the title event after intermission when the lights were dimmed and the choir moved back and forth in the aisles singing four carols arranged by conductor A. Dennis Sparger. Everybody ended up on stage where along with the orchestra they continued the mood with pieces by Healey Willan and a spirited arrangement by Robert DeCormier of the spiritual “The Virgin Had a Baby” complete with percussion which created an irresistible urge to clap along.

Soprano Mary Wilson has fashioned an international career since being a Bach Society Young Artist from 1997-1999 and she was featured in Mozart’s “Exsultate, jubilate” and a sparkling rendition of Handel’s “Let the Bright Seraphim” with spot-on trumpet work by Michael Walk. She negotiated some very challenging high notes and quick rhythms with apparent ease while Sparger kept the orchestra at a level that allowed her star to shine without being overwhelmed.

The Archdiocesan Children’s Choir with its recently appointed conductor Horst Buchholz had three numbers on their own before they joined the adult choir at the end. None of what they did was particularly challenging, but the unison blend for “Ave Maria” was impressive.

The concert opened with a bang-up arrangement of “Joy to the World” by Randol Alan Bass that played out like an extended fantasia on the hymn tune. Bradford Barlow and Howard Helvey had beautiful takes on “Joseph Dearest Joseph Mine” and “Love Came Down at Christmas” as well as their own spectaculars like “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.”

The acapella work by the choir on pieces like “Carol of the Holy Child” by Composer-in-Residence Stephen Mager was nicely phrased with good balance and excellent intonation. Ron Klemm, formerly of radio station KFUO (now manager of Classic99.com and a member of the chorus) led the audience in two sing-a-longs. The festivities were topped off with a staple of the Christmas music repertoire—“Star Carol” by John Rutter. Nice work all around, and a great start to the holiday.