

Smaller venue proves to be a rich setting for Bach Society

Classical music review • Church offers opportunity for intimate encounter with audience.

BY SARAH BRYAN MILLER • Classical Music Critic
sbmiller@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8249

The Bach Society of St. Louis is best known for doing big works for orchestra and chorus in big venues. On Saturday, artistic director A. Dennis Sparger and the chorus offered something a little out of their usual: a cappella choral music in a smaller setting.

The chorus sang at Our Lady of the Pillar Roman Catholic Church in Creve Coeur, a church that has a relatively small nave, so the audience could be close, and a friendly acoustic, for buoyant sound.

The concert opened with tuneful readings of two of Anton Bruckner's most beautiful motets, "Locus iste" and "Virga Jesse floruit." The chorus sounded unusually lush, appropriate for Bruckner's heartfelt Romanticism.

The centerpiece was the Mass in E-flat by Josef Rheinberger (1839-1901), with relatives of Rheinberger's, Tom and Shirley Rheinberger of St. Louis, seated in a place of honor in the front row. (Rheinberger, Liechtenstein's favorite musical son, actually spent most of his life working in Munich, where he composed prolifically.)

Much of it was lovely. The first movement, the Kyrie, got a solid performance. So did the Sanctus and Benedictus; the Benedictus, with two solo quartets, had some truly gorgeous singing from its well-matched Choir I. The final movement, the Agnus Dei, benefited from some really great subbasement sound in the second bass section.

The Gloria and Credo weren't quite up to the same standard, suffering from several messy entrances and some poor blend. The Credo was frequently full-throated in passages where subtlety was in order.

In the second half, the society's two assistant conductors, Steven Slusher and Joel D. Knapp, each led a group of songs. Slusher drew two works by Randall Thompson: "The Best of Rooms" and "Glory to God in the Highest." "Rooms" was beautifully sung; "Glory" had some tuning issues.

Other highlights included Javier Busto's "Ave Maria," conducted by Knapp, and Howard Helvey's "O Lux Beatissima," led by Sparger. Everyone seemed to have a great time with the Moses Hogan arrangement of the spiritual "My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord," which benefited from the contributions of a really terrific tenor soloist, Joshua Stanton.

In general, the tuning and blend were better in the first half than in the second. One or two edgy soprano voices were in evidence throughout; by the time program's end, the section almost seemed to be in a competition to see who could stick out the most egregiously.

M 1 • MONDAY • 04.26.2010

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH • 3