



Seraphic Fire brings a warm glow to varied Christmas program

By Lawrence Budmen



Thu Dec 8, 2016

at 1:40 pm

[No Comments](#)

Seraphic Fire's annual Christmas concerts have proved hugely popular, often drawing the choir's largest audiences of the season. What makes these events really special, however, is the inventive programming which combines holiday rarities with familiar carols.

On Wednesday night the sanctuary of St. Sophia's Greek Orthodox Cathedral was bedecked with a Christmas tree and holiday decorations, providing a festive atmosphere for the 90-minute concert. Hot, muggy weather with high humidity did not exactly fit the title "On Winter's Night" but the music was perfectly appropriate for a white Christmas. James K. Bass, the group's associate conductor, director of education and now director of choral studies at UCLA, was the evening's conductor and he proved an enlivening presence.

The male members of the choir entered in a processional with candles and began the plainchant *Vieni, Vieni Emmanuel*. Tyler Ray, one of several new singers comprising the 13 member choir, brought a clear, vibratoless tenor to the exposed solo passages. The women then entered and displayed great purity of timbres for the swaying melody of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." The original plainchant version of "Adeste Fideles" was given spare, austere treatment by the male singers. A gorgeous and joyous version of the "O Come All Ye Faithful" version concluded the opening set. Bass drew beautifully varied dynamics, giving the familiar carol a sense of freshness.

The beguiling melodic lines of Nicholas Myers' "The Winter's Night" brought a warmly resonant harmonic blend of male and female voices.

Prior to a group of English carols, Bass pointed out that the British wish people a "Happy Christmas" instead of "merry" and offer Christmas biscuits instead of cookies.

England has given us some of our most distinguished holiday fare. It was easy to see how Elgar dominated British music in the early 20th century. Even in his miniature "I Sing the Birth," there is mastery of structure and thematic imagination. Tenor Steven Soph's strength of declamation, Virginia Warnken's dark alto sound and John Buffett's manly bass contributed exceptional solos in the call and

response sections. Two settings of "Adam Lay Ybounden" were mirror opposites. John Ireland's version was spirited while Matthew Martin's was more modernist. Singing in a prolonged, difficult high register, the women's voices sounded as one.

A German cycle was distinguished by Max Reger's direct and straightforward arrangement of "Es Kommit ein Schiff, geladin" (A ship is driving with a load) and Renaissance master Michael Praetorius' light, almost dancelike "In dulci jubilo," a delightful change from the more familiar version of the tune. The exquisite blending of voices was particularly notable in the Reger piece.

Seraphic Fire has expanded its educational program to include choral studies at the University of Miami Frost School of Music. Doctor of musical arts candidate Kyle Nielsen took the podium for a firmly shaped performance of Gustav Holst's lovely and stately carol "In the Bleak Midwinter." Nielsen avoided the temptation to overly sentimentalize Holst's Christmas standard. He also led a brisk "Carol of the Bells" in the great Peter Wilhousky arrangement. Individual voicing and gradations of volumes were strongly emphasized. Elizabeth Poston's "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree has almost become a Seraphic Fire signature piece. This time the lovely singing and clean articulation of sopranos Rebecca Myers and Amanda Sidebottom was exceptional.

Missouri-based choral composer Susan LaBarr's *Songs for the Morning Star* received its premiere, one of eight commissioned works for the choir's 15th anniversary season. Utilizing German, Basque and English carols, LaBarr's arrangements and elaborations are beautifully crafted and destined to become part of the holiday choral literature. Her minute variations on the principal melody in "Blessed Be That Maid Marie" are imaginative and creative and the diverting transcription of "There Stood in Heaven a Linden Tree" registered holiday cheer.

Jason Burke's transcription of the jazz standard "Nature Boy" by Eden Abbez was sung with languid serenity. The performance was dedicated to the victims of the massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. Cait Frizzell's light and radiant voice floated over the choir in Sara Teasdale's "Only in Sleep."

"Silent Night" was begun softly by the female voices before the entire chorale sang a full-throttle rendition. Seraphic Fire brings something special to even the most familiar of Christmas carols. They concluded singing in a processional exit but returned for a crisp traversal of "Ding Dong Merrily on High," a wonderful holiday encore.

The program will be repeated 7:30 p.m. Thursday at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Coral Gables; 7:30 p.m. Friday at First United Methodist Church in Coral Gables; 7:30 Saturday at All Souls Episcopal Church in Miami Beach; 7 p.m. Sunday at All Saints Episcopal Church in Fort Lauderdale; 7 pm Tuesday at Bower Chapel in Naples; and 4 p.m. December 18 at St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in Boca Raton. seraphicfire.org; 305-285-9060.

Posted in [Performances](#)