



## Seraphic Fire marks 15 years with a wide-ranging showcase

By Lawrence Budmen



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Patrick Quigley led Seraphic Fire in a 15th anniversary concert Wednesday night at St. Sophia Cathedral in Miami.

Seraphic Fire celebrated its 15th anniversary Wednesday night in Miami with a diverse program that showcased the versatility and skilled vocalism that has been the trademark of Patrick Quigley's choral ensemble.

The evening opened with a rousing traversal of *Invocation* by William Billings, an example of the Colonial New England hymnal tradition. (The text "Majestic God our music inspire and fill us with seraphic fire" inspired the choir's name.) Around ninety minutes later the concert concluded with Italian Renaissance composer Giovanni Pierluigi de Palestrina dark, austere setting of the "Agnus Dei" from *Missa Papae Marcelli*. The ethereal sounds of seventeen voices filled the sanctuary of St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral with this deeply emotional prayer for peace and mercy. Between these two brief liturgical gems, Quigley offered an overview of many of the group's specialties.

Quigley has admirably presented and commissioned works by contemporary composers. He repeated *Will Lift Mine Eyes* by Jake Runestad, a wonderful conflation of flowing lyricism and modernist harmonies.

Two of the nine commissioned scores for this landmark season received premieres. In very different ways, both were winning creations that should become repertoire pieces. A lovely, memorable melody runs through *Orpheus With His Lute* by Alvaro Bermudez. Bermudez's writing for women's voices is especially finely gauged and idiomatic. The composer capably accompanied the singers on the guitar.

Seraphic Fire presented the premiere of *The Road to Hiroshima: A Requiem* by Shawn Crouch in 2005. Now on the faculty of the UM Frost School of Music, Crouch continues to contribute distinguished works to the choral literature. (His *Meditations and Ecstasies: A Mass* was one of the finest new scores premiered in South Florida during 2016.)

Crouch's *When Music Sounds* is the type of work only the best choirs can perform. Some singers repeat the words "when..music" while the female voices sing a high vocal line that sounds almost instrumental at times. Eventually the disparate elements morph into a bouncing rhythm that brings all the strands together. Crouch's vignette is masterfully conceived and another strikingly original creation from this gifted composer. Quigley brought out the wide harmonic and dynamic palette in Crouch's voicing and the singers impressively scaled the work's complexities.

Quigley and associate conductor James K. Bass have achieved a distinctive Seraphic Fire sonority over the past decade. Two Renaissance pieces splendidly demonstrated the transparent textures and radiant sound of the choir. The superbly blended voices soared in Orlando Gibbons' *O Clap Your Hands*, a rousing anthem filled with joy. In the more formal pages of Tomas Luis de Victoria's setting of *Regina caeli*, the striking timbres of sopranos Margot Rood and Sarah Moyer, alto Luthien Brackett and tenor Patrick Muehleise were astutely balanced with the vibrancy of the full contingent.

Finnish composer Jakko Mäntyjärvi's *Canticum Calamitatis Maritimae* was inspired by the 1994 MS Estonia tragedy in which the ferry sank, killing over eight hundred passengers. Quigley aptly called the score a "symphony for voices." Opening with breathing and whispered lines, a female voice seems to cry out amid shock and chaos. A narrator sings the text of news reports about the disaster. The full choir summons the enormity of the event and the final "requiem aeternam" (eternal peace) is intoned by the basses and sopranos.

Mäntyjärvi's spare writing suggests a uniquely Scandinavian coolness that is all the more moving for its seemingly simplicity. Singing from the church's balcony, the dusky timbre of Amanda Crider's chant-like interjections contrasted with the larger musical canvass. Bass Charles Wesley Evans brought relaxed musicality to the speech-inflected pages of narration.

*Blessed is he that considereth the poor* by Alexander Arkhangelsky (1846-1924) comes from the same Russian liturgical tradition as Rachmaninoff's *All Night Vigil*, which Seraphic Fire has impressively sung on several occasions. (Arkhangelsky was controversial in Czarist Russia for including women's voices in his sacred compositions.) There was strength and power in tenor Steven Soph's declamation and the choir sounded twice its size in the full-voiced recitatives of this fascinating curio from the byways of Russian religious music.

Two motets from the romantic era nicely contrasted the restrained song of Mendelssohn's *Denn er hat seinen Engeln befohlen* with the rich outpouring of Brahms' *Schaffe in mir Gott, ein rein Herz*.

Quigley dedicated two excerpts from British choral master Herbert Howells' *Requiem* to significant patrons of the group that have passed away. Howells was greatly influenced by Renaissance music and his Requiem reflects that unique British skill at crafting large scale choral works. The solo trio of soprano Jolle Greenleaf, mezzo Margaret Lias and tenor Steven Bradshaw exquisitely detailed Howells' beautiful harmonies. The vocal gleam of "To All, To Each" from *Carols of Death* by William Schuman (displaying the softer side of this quintessential American symphonist) and the quiet tranquility of *Lay a Garland* by Robert Lucas Pearsall (1795-1856) offered solace in time of mourning.

For over a decade Seraphic Fire has presented some of South Florida's most distinguished and enjoyable concerts. Quigley has managed to carve a special niche for the choir without compromising artistic integrity in programming and performance. May the group continue to prosper and enrich the area's musical life for the next fifteen years.

**Seraphic Fire repeats the program 7 p.m. Thursday at Bower Chapel in Naples, 7:30 p.m. Friday at First United Methodist Church in Coral Gables, 7:30 p.m. Saturday at All Saints Episcopal Church in Fort Lauderdale and 4 p.m. Sunday at All Souls Episcopal Church in Miami Beach.**

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