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World premiere Easter work, Schütz stand out at Seraphic Fire

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James Kallembach. (Photo by Erielle Bakkum)

By Robert Croan

Bach's jubilant, elating Easter Oratorio (BWV 249) was the featured item in advance announcements of Seraphic Fire's Easter weekend concerts (seen Friday night in Fort Lauderdale's Sanctuary Church), but in the event, two shorter works on the first half of the program — one brand-new, the other older than Bach — provided the event's most rewarding moments.

At the start, conductor and artistic director Patrick Dupré Quigley announced something to the effect that what we were about to hear was the world premiere of a great work that would quickly take its place among the masterpieces of the choral repertory. It was a very different sort of Easter oratorio commissioned by Seraphic Fire from composer James Kallembach, currently director of choral activities at the University of Chicago.

Kallembach, 41, is better known as a performer than a composer. He has, in fact, conducted premieres of works by William Bolcom, Shulamit Ran and James MacMillan, among other established contemporary composers. Quigley's praise may have been a little lavish, but the new Easter Oratorio is original in concept and content, gratefully written for the ensemble's 17-voice choir and idiomatically scored for Seraphic Fire's 15-piece orchestra.

The unattributed libretto (probably by Kallembach himself) centers not on the traditional Easter events but

rather on the tale as seen from the point of view of Goethe's Faust, portrayed here by the excellent deep bass, James Bass. The work unfolds in three languages – German, Latin and English, alternating or superimposed on one another. The opening movement pays homage to Bach's Easter cantata, Christ lag in Todesbanden (BWV 4), with a cleverly skewed use of the traditional chorale.

The commentary on man's eternal battle between life and death is addressed first by Faust – beautifully articulated by Bass in very clear German – and then in a brief but pungent duet for soprano and mezzo-soprano (Sarah Moyer and Clara Osowski). The final movement turns from lamentation to joy in the ultimate "Christus surrexit! ... Alleluia!"

Kallembach's brief "oratorio" was followed by the contemplative, unique and exquisite *Musikalische Exequien* of Heinrich Schütz, a very great and underappreciated composer who was a German contemporary and counterpart of Monteverdi. Schütz's music is deceptively simple (though all the more difficult to bring off because it is so bare and exposed). The *Exequien* (funeral music) is the first requiem in the German language, possibly the only one before the famous Brahms German Requiem, composed two centuries later.



Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672).

Schütz's vocal parts are accompanied only by basso continuo, in this case harpsichord, viola da gamba and double bass. This is harmonically static music, given variety and scope by minimalistic melodic variants and a concerto-like alternation between solo groups and the larger vocal ensemble. Quigley elicited in this piece gorgeous singing and nuanced phrasing that brought every word, every line into vivid relief. The main section gives way to two brief antiphonal movements that form an odd but interesting epilogue.

The small orchestra exchanged modern instruments for the period variety in Bach's Easter Oratorio on the second half. It's not really an oratorio, but a 40-minute cantata, most of its lively and lovely material taken by Bach from his existing secular works. Its formal design and character resemble a baroque dance suite: three concerto-like movements (the third including voices) as an overture, each subsequent number in a

different dance rhythm (minuet, bourée, gavotte, gigue) separated by brief recitatives that create a rudimentary story line.

The performance of Bach was less polished than Seraphic Fire's earlier efforts of the evening. Ensemble was less precise, and the trumpeters seemed uncomfortable with their valveless instruments, although oboists Rick Basehore and Kevin Pearl offered some commendable solo virtuosity.

Among the vocal soloists, tenor Steve Soph gave an outstanding account of his aria with two flutes — a gorgeous lullaby in the mold of Bach's familiar "Sheep may safely graze." The other vocal soloists, however, demonstrated less technical proficiency and grasp of the requisite style.

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