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Seraphic Fire triumphs in challenging look at American hymnody

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Beth Willer.

In its decade and a half of concertizing in South Florida, Seraphic Fire has occasionally featured concerts drawing on the music of the American church, usually that arising from the Protestant and African-American traditions of the 19th century.

In its second concert of the season, the Miami choir again turned to American hymnody, but in the program assembled by guest conductor Beth Willer, director of Boston's Lorelei Ensemble and a professor at Bucknell University, there were no plush arrangements of "In the Sweet By and By" or "Wade in the Water."

What Willer devised instead was an intellectually rigorous, musically ambitious, hugely difficult program that refracted the idea of American religious song through a T.S. Eliot-inspired prism and lets its split rays land on a substantial amount of newer American composition as well as pieces from other parts of the globe extending as far back as the 12th century.

Heady stuff, in other words, but Willer and the choir came through it brilliantly, and gave its audience Sunday afternoon at St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in Boca Raton not only a feast for serious thought but also a remarkable overview of contemporary compositional invention.

Although this program was grounded in the American tradition, it ranged far afield while drawing its unifying theme from Eliot's "Little Gidding," the last section of which was reprinted in the booklet. Willer and Seraphic Fire opened the concert with music by a Russian exile, Igor Stravinsky, who spent the last decades of his life in Los Angeles, and who in the first days of 1962 composed a short serial choral work, Anthem (The Dove Descending Breaks the Air), using as its text the fourth section of Eliot's poem.

What one heard in this piece was a serial voice that was still narrative, and congruent with centuries of musical tradition. That didn't make it any easier to sing, but the 13 singers on hand Sunday did it beautifully, intoning each note of the row with precision, as if they were carefully picking pieces of exotic but delicate fruit. In the gentle dynamic arc of the piece, which ends almost abruptly, you could hear a musical mastery in the singing that suggested confident virtuosity. They made a great case for this brief work and by extension for the infrequently explored serial period of Stravinsky.

Stravinsky lived not far from Arnold Schoenberg in L.A., but the two never visited each other, no doubt for complicated psychological reasons. The elder composer was also represented on this program, with his *Friede auf Erden* (Peace on Earth) (Op. 13), a Christmas-centered motet on a text by the Swiss writer Conrad Meyer. Written in 1907, it's one of Schoenberg's last works with a distinct tonal center, though its tonality is brought to the breaking point. It is also has an extravagant whisper-to-scream dynamic range, and is without doubt one of the most difficult things this group has ever sung.

But they did it wonderfully, building from its modest, quiet opening to full-blown D major ecstasy at the climax, deftly handling this piece's constantly shifting harmonic plan, its multiple divided parts and its non-repeating, disjunct melodic lines as smoothly as could be hoped for. This is the real secret of Seraphic Fire's success: It employs first-class musicians with great ears as well as voices who can tackle any challenge a composer wants to throw at them.

A more contemporary example of that came in *Fly Away I*, by the young American composer Caroline Shaw, who's still in her 30s but already has a Pulitzer Prize to her credit. This makes a passing reference to Albert Brumley's gospel standard, but soon abandons it to break some of the words down into rhythmic patterns that soon explode in a sudden swoop upward to what is essentially a series of rock chord changes sung to an "eeeeee" vocalization; it strongly suggests that the music of Queen has lodged itself in Shaw's musical memory. It's great fun, and again requires tremendous vocal agility to pull off, as the singers must land with total accuracy on a faraway chord to start that section — which they did.

Willer programmed three pieces by the American composer William Duckworth, who died in 2012 and was best-known for his post-minimalist piano cycle *The Time Curve Preludes* and perhaps more important, his

advocacy of the internet as a game-changer for composition. Three pieces from his 1980 collection *Southern Harmony*, inspired by shape-note hymns, were programmed — “Wondrous Love,” “Sardina” and “War Department.” This is surely to be considered a classic work of choral composition, little-known as these pieces are to the general public. Much the most haunting was “Wondrous Love,” with soprano Sara Guttenberg singing a long-breathed, searching modal melody with great loveliness; in context with a drone from the other singers it harkened back seemingly to music of the Middle Ages.

And literal music of the Middle Ages was presented in *O virtus sapientiae*, a hymn by the 12th-century German abbess and composer Hildegard von Bingen, as arranged by the veteran American choral composer Alice Parker. The singers gave the large audience at the church seamless lines, folding and unfolding, adding to the feeling of timeless concerns that the concert was addressing. And there was another evocation of the past in two works by the Cambridge, Mass.-based composer Adam Jacob Simon, “Marching to Zion” and “Joys Above His Power,” which are contemporary shape-note songs that vividly and engagingly also conjure up the confident joyfulness of William Billings, especially in Seraphic Fire’s forceful readings.

The concert ended with L.A.-based composer Shawn Kirchner’s “Hallelujah,” a big-boned arrangement of William Walker’s 1835 shape-note melody that was sung with crispness and optimism. Before that came two songs of much wider provenance, “Amazing Grace,” as arranged by Robert Page — bass Charles Evans was the fine soloist in this elegant and moving arrangement — and Randall Thompson’s Alleluia.

The Thompson work, written for Tanglewood in 1940, is the only piece of this excellent mid-century American composer and educator that still has any wide currency, which is a shame. But if it had to be just one testament, it’s good that it’s this piece. Deceptively simple but cannily constructed out of just one word, it has a direct beauty that audiences have taken to their hearts for decades. Seraphic Fire sang it with tenderness and a relaxed, full sound that highlighted the contrast of its sweetly conservative harmonic style with every other work on the program.

Willer, who briefly got choked up talking about humankind’s quest for peace as expressed in these pieces, is an artist of total commitment who carefully and expertly crafted this concert, knowing that she would find South Florida audiences who would embrace it. So it may be no wonder that the Thompson Alleluia sounded like a benediction — for American musical creators and performers, and for a country in need of as much hope as it can get.

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