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Lang's 'Little Match Girl Passion' makes moving impact in Seraphic Fire performance

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By Robert Croan

In prefatory remarks to Seraphic Fire's January concerts, director Patrick Dupré Quigley told audiences that the featured work, David Lang's *The Little Match Girl Passion*, is such a strong piece that no other contemporary choral work could stand up to it on the same program. Instead, Quigley balanced the 40-minute oratorio with three Renaissance motets.

Quigley also dedicated the performances in five South Florida venues to the memory of colleague Mark Jones, organist of First Presbyterian Church (“The Pink Church”) in Pompano, who died Dec. 24.

The conductor’s pronouncement about the oratorio was an overstatement, but on the basis of the finely honed rendition in Fort Lauderdale’s All Saint’s Episcopal Church on Saturday night, Lang’s *Match Girl* is a fastidiously composed, emotionally moving addition to today’s choral repertory. In the decade since its world premiere at New York’s Carnegie Hall in 2007, the work has won critical praise along with honors that include a Pulitzer Prize plus a Grammy award for its Harmonia Mundi recording.

This is a versatile piece: it may be performed by four solo voices or a full choir, in concert version or staged as a semi-opera, with accompaniment of a single percussionist (here the virtuosic Matthew Henderson). Lang’s music is appropriately spare and minimalist. There is not an extraneous note. In contrast to the composer’s earlier efforts with New York’s in-your-face Bang on a Can ensemble, the present work is soft-grained and reflective.

The word “passion,” in its non-romantic sense, generally refers to the suffering and death of Christ. Lang, writing his own libretto, drew parallels between Jesus and Hans Christian Andersen’s abused young girl, whose father sends her out to die in the cold. There is also a component of relevance to 21st-century social issues.

Modeling his composition on Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, Lang framed the story in chorales of lament at the start and finish. The opening pays homage to Bach in a languorous but intense 12/8 chorus. In 14 brief movements that follow, the work narrates the plot in translation of Andersen’s words, interspersing commentary that presents a contemporary point of view.

As Bach did with the words of his Evangelist, Lang set Andersen’s narration in fast-moving, musical speech – choral speech here, rather than Bach’s operatic-style recitative. However, most of the similarities between Lang’s “passion” and Bach’s are structural and literary, not musical. Lang is not a modern-day Bach – nor should he be. His musical language is all his own, admirably so. His style has been described as post-minimalist, and there are echoes of Philip Glass and Steve Reich in his motivic repetitions and hammering word reiterations, but Lang summoned the gamut of present-day compositional techniques to achieve effects dictated by his texts.

Lang’s resourceful use of the percussion provides a plethora of sonic color, cogent to the message of the words and illusorily orchestral at times. The printed score calls for bass drum, brake drum, chimes, tubular bells, sleigh bells, small cymbals and glockenspiel, though the battery appeared to be pared down a bit last week.

At two points, in an original and very effective device, the composer requires a soloist to declaim the syllables that the chorus is singing simultaneously with broken repeated notes that emphasize the fears and horrors articulated in the text. "Sing as long as you can and exaggerate slightly the struggle for air when you run out and re-enter," is the marking in the score.

This unorthodox direction was accomplished quite brilliantly by tenor Steve Bradshaw in the opening movement, and by alto Amanda Crider in "When it is time for me to go," the latter one of the most affecting segments of the score. The commentary movements – "Dearest heart" (in slow moving, clearly enunciated homophony), "Penance and remorse" "Have mercy, O God" and in particular the aforementioned "When it is time for me to go" – generate the highest emotional heat, implying an allusion to Bach's placement of the alto arias in his St. Matthew.

The Renaissance music that opened the program featured two major works by the Franco-Flemish master Josquin des Prez: his lament on the death of his teacher Johannes Ockeghem, and his grand Miserere. Along with a short motet by Josquin's student Nicholas Gombert, the music was fashioned by Seraphic Fire's 12 superb vocalists with unflinching precision and gravitas.

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