

South Florida Classical Review » » Seraphic Fire opens with a festive and reverent “Spanish Pilgrimage”



Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain.

Seraphic Fire’s “Parables of Passion” series was one of the high points of last season. After stellar performances of major passion settings by Bach, Arvo Pärt and David Lang, one might have thought that what would follow in 2018–19 would prove anticlimactic.

But, in characteristic fashion, artistic director Patrick Quigley opened the choir’s 17th season Wednesday night with one of the most unique programs the group has ever presented.

“Spanish Pilgrimage” traced the music sung and heard by religious travelers along the ancient 100-kilometer route of the Camino de Santiago leading to the Shrine of St. James (at the Cathedral of Santiago

de Compostela in Galicia, Spain). Excerpts from early sacred chant by anonymous composers were interspersed with the work of 16th- and 17th-century composers of the Roman Catholic Church.

Vocal lines in these scores were often doubled by the forerunners of modern brass instruments. Playing their modern counterparts, the superb American Brass Quintet joined the choir for a program of music that was both reverent and celebratory. The multitalented Scott Allen Jarrett was at the organ, providing accompaniment and interludes between the choral works. Finally, an outstanding world premiere provided both contrast and continuity on this immersive musical journey.

St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral has never proved a more appropriate venue than for this concert. Quigley's varied logistics fielded double and triple choirs, both a cappella and with brass and organ accompaniment. Voices emerged from the aisles, the rear and the sides as well as the central stage. The ornate sanctuary's clear and vibrant acoustic enhanced this polyphonic feast of sounds.

The spare plainchant "O lux et decus Hispaniae" (O light and grace of Spain) from the anonymous collection Codex Calixtinus was given deep resonance by the male voices. Three beautifully blended female voices in the center aisle near the sanctuary's rear soared in the more developed lines of "O Virgo splendens" (O Virgin resplendent) from the *Libre de Vermell* series. *Duo Seraphim* by Francisco Guerrero was a noble anthem for triple choir, organ and brass, a song of joy in surround sound.

Quigley masterfully controlled the vocal components stationed around the room and never allowed the voluminous brass to overwhelm the singers. (He also asked the audience to refrain from applause until the program's conclusion.) The festive *Cantate Dómino cánticum novum* introduced the work of Sebastian de Vivanco and the vibrant, mellow corporate blend that has often been Seraphic Fire's musical signature came to the fore. *Parce mihi, Domine* (Spare me, Lord) by Cristóbal de Morales was a plea for forgiveness, sung by eight male voices with such intensity that it seemed to come from the depths of the soul.

Almost from its inception, Seraphim Fire has premiered new works. *Veni* by Australian-Canadian composer Julian Revie is the latest and one of the finest of these commissions.

Presently composer in residence at St. Thomas Moore, Yale University's Catholic Chapel, Revie counts Milton Babbitt, Samuel Adler and Philip Lasser among his teachers. Far from seeming out of place, his new work formed both a commentary and expansion on the Renaissance sounds surrounding it. The text from the more-than-thousand-year-old *O Antiphons* collection references both the Old and New Testaments from the prophesies of Isaiah to the Second Coming in Revelations.

Opening in disoriented vocal tones, the brass provides stabilizing harmonics until the chorus coalesces into a forward moving melodic pattern and progresses into carol-like warmth of phrase and pulse. The score rises to an exuberant climax at the "O Key of David" section as the choir calls for prisoners to be freed before receding to softness. A frantic final segment with the brass turning dissonant concludes with quiet female voices like angels from afar in a prayer for salvation. Revie manages to pack a plethora of imaginative choral and instrumental writing into the work's 12-minute span. He is clearly a rising and significant choral composer.

Much of the program's final section was devoted to the music of the towering sacred composer Tomás Luís de Victoria. Victoria's music has been a mainstay of Seraphic Fire's repertoire with the choir performing his works every season since its inception. The full sound of double choir rang out in thrilling fashion through the cathedral in Victoria's *Ave Regina caelorum* (Hail, Queen of Heaven). *Pange lingua more hispano* is a more complex creation that soars to heights in veneration of Jesus with a lilting and jubilant finale. It is remarkable that Victoria could have written music both so austere and massively rousing in the Renaissance age.

Along with Revie's new work, perhaps the evening's high point was Victoria's hymn to Spain *O lux et decus Hispaniae* (O light and grace of Spain) with the overlay of women's voices resplendent and the final extended Alleluia sung with heft and full throated abandon. *Regina caeli* (Queen of Heaven) is one of Victoria's most inspired songs of praise, and concluded the evening with a finely balanced display of the combined ensembles.

Special credit to Jarrett for his discreet but precise and enlivening organ accompaniment throughout the concert. It was especially gratifying to see the fine countertenor Reginald Mobley, who has been absent for several seasons, once again in the choir.

The American Brass Quintet opened the program with the first movement of *Colchester Fantasy* by Eric Ewazen, a jazz-infused vehicle that provides a blazing showcase for the combination of two trumpets, two trombones and horn.

This program will be taken on tour to Goshen, Indiana, Overland Park, Kansas, and La Jolla, California in February. In the meanwhile there are four remaining South Florida performances of this most special Seraphic Fire celebration.

Seraphic Fire repeats “Spanish Pilgrimage” 7:30 p.m. Thursday at St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church in Boca Raton; 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 the South Miami Dade Cultural Arts Center in Cutler Bay. seraphicfire.org