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Seraphic Fire's 15th anniversary concert masterful, eclectic

January 24, 2017 By Greg Stepanich — 0 Comments



Seraphic Fire at St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Church last week, performing its 15th-anniversary program. (From Facebook)

The South Florida classical music scene was rather different 15 years ago than it is today, and while in some aspects of those pre-recession days it was more robust, in one thing in particular there is no comparison.

Today, there has been substantial growth in the appearance of smaller arts organizations, with chamber orchestras, chamber music series and even opera companies hanging out their sonic shingles and inviting audiences to stop by. One of those groups, a professional chamber choir drawn from the nation's finest younger singers and based in Miami, has gone perhaps further than any other of the groups that have come onto the scene since the early years of the George W. Bush administration.

That group is Seraphic Fire, led by Patrick Dupré Quigley, one of the only South Florida-based classical groups to earn a Grammy nomination (two of them, in fact). Usually 13 singers strong, it has made around a dozen recordings and begun to tour cities in the Northeast with its varied programs, which include

everything from Lassus to Philip Glass. Earlier this week, the Clinton Family Fund — a 21-year-old Chicago-based charitable organization that gives to the arts and Protestant churches, and not related to the former president or presidential candidate — said it would be making a “transformative investment” in Seraphic Fire, which in all likelihood means a much higher level for this organization.

It is a remarkable success story, and this past weekend’s concerts, which celebrated the 15th anniversary, provided a strong example of just why it is that Seraphic Fire is so eminently deserving of that kind of success. Indeed, this season the group is featuring a series of world premieres that already have included a major work by Christopher Theofanidis and three lovely new Christmas carol arrangements by Susan LaBarr.

Saturday night’s concert at All Saints Episcopal in Fort Lauderdale, which has been a venue for Seraphic Fire since its origins and is the site where most of its recordings were made, featured an eclectic lineup of ancient and contemporary music that included two new works by longtime friends of Seraphic Fire.

The first of them was *Orpheus With His Lute*, set to the familiar Shakespeare text by Alvaro Bermudez, a fine guitarist who performed the instrumental accompaniment for his new piece. Bermudez also folded in the traditional *In Paradisum* text from the Latin Mass for the Dead, in an effort to suggest the context in which the Orpheus song in *Henry VIII* is heard — the downfall and divorce of the monarch’s first wife, Katharine.

It’s a pleasant piece with a melancholy, Spanish-flavored melody and harmonies, over a simple minor-key guitar accompaniment that at the end modulates to the major. Bermudez’s compositional focus is chiefly lyrical, and he sets both texts with skill and straightforwardness. The choral writing is warm and rich, and its relative ease of language and performance requirements would make it a promising addition to college choral repertoire.

The other new piece was by Shawn Crouch, who was the first director of Seraphic Fire’s Miami Choral Academy, and whose *The Road from Hiroshima* (2005) was one of the first major works the choir commissioned. Crouch’s *When Music Sounds*, set to a poem by the early 20th-century British writer Walter de la Mare, is a deft minimalist piece in which the words “when music” are repeated in stop-and-start fashion, setting the pace for a layered soundscape of other motifs, including long-held notes and shorter, bustling figures. It was arresting to listen to, and very imaginative, but perhaps too derivative of other minimalist works; it had despite its cleverness and major compositional chops a feeling of been-there, done-that.

Another contemporary work on the program was *Canticum Calamitatis Maritimae* (1997), by the Finnish

composer Jaakko Mantyjärvi. This is an astonishing and brilliant work, a threnody for the 853 people lost in the wreck of the MS Estonia in the Baltic Sea in September 1994. Mezzo-soprano Amanda Crider stood behind the choir to sing the wordless shepherd's song as her colleagues whispered in Latin the Requiem text *Lux aeterna*, and then took the listener through the original radio broadcast reporting the tragedy.

That text is mingled with Psalm 107 in a most effective way, with drones, short hesitant phrases, and a slow accumulation of voices, all the while with the shepherd's song coming in over periods of stasis. It beautifully expressed not just the terror of the event, but the human empathy of the composer, and Seraphic Fire's masterful performance of it was the most riveting piece of the concert.

Saturday night's program, for which the choir was expanded to 17 singers, also included favorites such as William Billings's *Invocation*, which gave the group its name ("Majestic God our muse inspire / and fill us with seraphic fire"), and the young American composer Jake Runestad's *I Will Lift Mine Eyes*, already a classic work for concert and academic choirs. Both received strong readings.

In the first part of the intermission-less program, the singers sounded excellent but somewhat pushed, muscular almost to the point of shouting, particularly in *Blessed is he that considereth the poor*, a setting of Psalm 41 by the Russian court composer Alexander Arkhangelsky. As the concert went on, the edges of their vocalizing softened, giving two German Romantic works, Mendelssohn's *Denn er hat seinen Engeln befohlen* and Brahms's *Schaffe in mir, Gott, ein rein Herz*, a much warmer sound. The contrapuntal mastery of the Brahms motet was well-handled, and demonstrated the composer's deep familiarity with Renaissance music, which was very unusual for his time.

Two excerpts from the British composer Herbert Howells's *Requiem* ("Salvator mundi" and "Psalm 23") came across with gravity, and there was some nice duet work in the psalm from soprano Jolle Greenleaf and mezzo Margaret Lias. The British attorney and musical amateur Robert Pearsall's *Lay a Garland* was sweet and charming, but it was American composer William Schuman's "To All, to Each," from his *Carols of Death* that stood out most. Relatively simple but darkly beautiful, it was sung with care and modesty, and made a haunting impression.

Music of the Renaissance was a key part of the program, including Orlando Gibbons's *O Clap Your Hands*, Tomas Luis de Victoria's *Regina caeli, laetare*, and Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's second "Agnus Dei" from his *Missa Papae Marcelli*. In each of these pieces, the singers adopted a purity of sound and attack that made each of them vivid, and also clearly showed to the audience how difficult they are. The Gibbons was a little heavy on its feet, but the Victoria sounded joyful, and the cool serenity of the Palestrina was an ideal ending for this exceptional mixed bill.

At one point, Quigley thanked the audience for its devotion over the years, saying that in doing what they loved to do, they were pleased to feel the love in return. On the eve of another big step for this choir, concertgoers can count themselves fortunate that 15 years ago, an ambitious young musician decided to make his mark on the choral world from the unlikely city of Miami, and that his success has led to so many years of fulfilling concerts that have raised South Florida's musical profile.

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