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A Light Ending to a Heavy Meal

By Lee Davis

If it's Christmas, it must be baroque for the Choral Society of the Hamptons.

Last Sunday, this elegant and energetic ensemble offered a groaning board of the baroque, from Bach to Handel, with stops for Purcell, Boyce and Vivaldi along the way, and as a fluffier dessert, a three-Christmas-carol singalong. If your taste was for the baroque, it was a banquet, beautifully and meticulously prepared. If a little baroque goes a long way for you, well ... it might have been more of a sojourn than a quick trip down holiday lane.

But even for those for whom 17th and 18th century liturgical music can wear a little heavy after 45 minutes, there was a highly palatable serving of Christmas delicacies.

The chorus, the youth chorus, four soloists (three professionals, one professional sounding chorus member) and a 12-piece string orchestra filled the Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church last Sunday with finely honed musical ornamentations of the nativity, life, death and resurrection of Christ.

As usual, resident conductor Mark Mangini picked a finely balanced program and delivered it with meticulous attention to detail and a sustained sensitivity to content and coloration.

The Bach Cantata No. 61 contains welcome inventiveness, from the opening French overture to the majestic abundance of the final chorus, sung with glorious gusto and richness by the chorus. Before this, the lovely soaring tones of tenor Paul Appleby caressed the air, "The Savior has come," which was lovely, but only a preparation for the golden soprano of Rada Hastings. Her singing was suspended with gossamer gentleness over a delightful walking melody in the cello, which moved gracefully over an organ's sustained foundation. The entire cantata was delivered with sensitivity and integrity.

Henry Purcell's Verse Anthem "Behold I bring you good tidings" followed. This is a sustained dialogue among chorus, orchestra and trio, in which Choral Society singer Carol Balodis added a velvety alto to the tenor tones of Paul Appleby and the rich resonance of baritone Dominic Inferrera.

The trio negotiated the expected baroque runs crisply and sweetly, and the flute sounds of the chorus—first augmenting, then conversing melodically with the trio in the "Hallelujah" section—were nicely satisfying.

The youth chorus was, as always, adorable, handling the sweet simplicity of American composer William Boyce's slender canon, "Alleluiah," with an appropriately gentle touch. It was the most melodic and accessible collection of moments in the concert.

The Vivaldi "Credo," a journey through Christ's execution, death, burial and resurrection, followed. Expertly performed, it was nevertheless, at least to this reviewer, a historic chore.

Things livened up, though, with Handel, who got a handle on the proceedings in his eleventh Anthem composed for the Duke of Chandos. As always, the master of the baroque got a lot of mileage out of a short text, ornamenting it, repeating it, inventing variations on it. All of this was trademarked by repeated sixteenth-note runs that ran the scale in a jolly fashion. The staccato statements were delivered with extraordinary precision and cleanness by the chorus, obviously inspired and firmly trained by conductor Mangini.

The tenor air, an elongation of sixteenth-note runs, melted into the soprano air, a considerably more interesting interlude that became the most beautifully executed and touching solo of the afternoon. Ms. Hastings, her richly shaded soprano floating flawlessly over the harmonics added by the oboe, turned her time with Handel into a virtuoso delectation.

The three-part choral conclusion to the Anthem was also a delight: Nary a muddy moment passed in the interlacing of melodies and contrasting dynamics, which led to what became, interestingly, a remarkably realized sketch for the later, more thrilling "Hallelujah Chorus" of his grand and earthshaking "Messiah."

And then there was the singalong, the moment for which the snappily dressed and remarkably patient children in the audience had endured 75 minutes of cascading baroque. Everyone joined in lustily, in this tastefully arranged climax, which was all at once an ultimately joyous, musical launching of the Christmas season.



The Choral Society of the Hamptons performed last weekend at the Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church. DANA SHAW