

Review: BACH'S CANTATAS SOAR UNDER WORTH'S DIRECTION IN WINDSOR CHRISTMAS CONCERT

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Bach's massive output of cantatas, numbering more than 230 known sacred and secular works, provides a rich trove for the tradition of holiday choral concerts. Conductor Robert Worth chose four disparate examples of Bach's compositional genius Dec. 9 in a concert combing a reduced-size Santa Rosa Symphony with the Sonoma Bach Choir and four exceptional soloists.

Part of the Donald and Maureen Green Orchestra Choral Series, the concert was the first of three and drew 350 Bach aficionados to Windsor's Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. They were not disappointed in the performance, carefully managed by Mr. Worth whose affection for the cantatas was palpable as he elegantly guided vocal soloists and special instrumental parts with aplomb.

A crisp beginning of Cantata BWV 62 (*Nun kommen der Heiden Heiland*) brought quickly to the ear that the church had little reverberation, the sustain perhaps well under a half second. The small size orchestra, led by Santa Rosa Symphony concertmaster Joseph Edelberg, sounded right for the space, and the orchestra's portable continuo organ, efficaciously played by Thomas Conroy, responded quickly all evening to Mr. Worth's direction. In this setting the small organ produced more of a fundamental than a harpsichord, and of course could actually be heard to the last row. Tenor soloist Brian Staufenbiel, light of voice but secure in German diction, sang well the aria *Bewundert, a Menschen* and was followed by impressive *fioratura* from baritone Hugh Davies. Mr. Davies commanded the difficult Coda with unexpected minor-key tones in *So geht aus Gottes Herrlichkeit*, leading effortlessly into the short solos by the two women singers, mezzo soprano Bonnie Brooks and soprano Carol Menke. The recitative duet, albeit abbreviated, was lovely. Ms. Menke's silken voice easily soared over the audience.

A work for Christmas, *Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ* (BWV 91) closed the first half and had two French horns in unison calling the forces to action. Horn players Darby Hinshaw and Alex Camphouse played without sheet music and nailed the tricky three-note repeated *presto* phrases, though the wicked top treble notes were a challenge. Ms. Menke began unaccompanied in the Choral *Der Glanz der höchsten Herrlichkeit*, followed by the Choir's women singers and then Mr. Staufenbiel. The dialogue with the winds and bassoon was lovely, as were the syncopated rhythmic patterns in the orchestra.

The Third Cantata (*Herr Gott, dich loben wir*, BWV 16) opened the second half with Randall Keith's strong bass viol line, and Doug Morton's quietly insistent trumpet solos with a long line. Mr. Morton's trills in the third part were clear, as was Ms. Brooks' recitative solo *Ach treuer Hort*. The aria *Geliebter Jesu, du allein* was an exceptional experience as without the Choir and Orchestra an elegant ensemble unfolded. Cellist Wanda Warkenton, English hornists Barbara Midney and Laura Reynolds and Mr. Conroy wove a refined rich sonic tapestry with Mr. Staufenbiel's graceful phrasing that underscored Bach's contrapuntal mastery.

The concert ended with a celebratory fanfare from the French horns and a staggered introduction of the four choral voice groups in the BWV Cantata 65 *Sie warden aus Saba alle kommen*. Mr. Worth, accurate as always with his left-arm cutoffs, guided the movement and the alleluia-like Chorale *Die kön'ge aus Saba kamen dar* with a pulsating continuo. The pacing was compact and the unison flute parts from Kathleen Reynolds and Bonnie Lockett melted into the music from the horns.

The vociferous applause after the fourth Bach Cantata seemed to have a component of not being sated with just four works from the Leipzig master. Praise of the performance can go no higher.