

Where Were You at 22?

by Steve Osborn - Classical Sonoma.org

Concert Review of **Young Masters: Bach and Handel 1707**

Saturday, November 19, 2011 performance at St. Eugene's Cathedral in Santa Rosa

Where were you at 22? Just graduating from college and trying to find a job? Contemplating a trip around the world to discover yourself? Writing musical masterpieces that would endure for more than 300 years and counting?

If you're Johann Sebastian Bach or Georg Friedrich Händel, the answers are no, no and yes. Born in the same year (1685) just 125 miles apart, their musical skills were such that both had obtained secure posts by the age of 22 and were already composing enduring works that have been in the repertoire ever since.

For their Nov. 19 concert at a packed St. Eugene's Cathedral in Santa Rosa, the Santa Rosa Symphony and the Sonoma Bach Choir, conducted by Robert Worth, performed four of those works, all composed in 1707: Handel's "Laudate pueri" and "Dixit Dominus" and Bach's cantatas "Aus der Tiefen" and "Der Herr denket an uns." The Händel pieces were composed during his sojourn in Rome, whereas the two cantatas are from Bach's stay in Mühlhausen, a small town in eastern Germany.

All four works were originally intended for church performance, with the Händel specifically designated for a Carmelite Vespers celebration at an important Roman church and the Bach cantatas for a small-town penitential service and wedding, respectively. The contrasting purposes and settings are but one indication of the major differences between the works. The Händel pieces are big, bold and festive, whereas the Bach are introspective, restrained and sublime.

These qualities emerged in the performance. Choir, soloists and orchestra were most confident in the Händel pieces, particularly the "Dixit Dominus," with its four-square writing, clear cadences and moments of obvious drama. In contrast, the Bach performances were more tentative, with a lack of certainty in some of the trickier choral passages and a tendency to drift.

Händel's "Dixit Dominus" was the musical high point of the evening. This glorious psalm setting uses five soloists, orchestra and choir to illuminate the text of Psalm 110, whose opening verse is, "The Lord said unto my Lord, sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." These bellicose words found their musical equivalent in a dramatic opening in a minor key with strong entrances from the choir and exuberantly played lines from the strings. Mr. Worth kept the forces moving at a brisk pace, working up a sweat with pronounced strokes from his baton and occasional sweeping motions with both arms to indicate crucial moments.

The text for the second verse is similarly bellicose, but here Händel offers a gorgeous lyrical duet for cello and alto, featuring in this case alto Karen Clark and the Symphony's new principal cellist, Adelle-Akiko Kearns. Both were outstanding, with Ms. Clark displaying a full-bodied voice with clear articulation and Ms. Kearns matching her note for note on a resonant, sweet-sounding instrument.

The remaining six sections of the “Dixit Dominus” featured fine solos from sopranos Carol Menke and Lindsey McLennan, tenor Scott Whitaker and bass Hugh Davies, alternating more or less with star turns for the choir. Despite having more than 40 voices, the choir clearly articulated most lines of the text, particularly in the sixth verse, where the line “conquassabit capita in terra multorum” (“He shall wound the heads of many countries”) was reiterated repeatedly, mimicking the blows inflicted by the Lord.

Near the end of the performance, a cell phone went off in the audience, thankfully in a pause between sections. Everyone listened attentively to the banal ringtone, which ultimately made the Händel sound all the better. The doxology of the last section is unrelenting, with voices entering again and again to stress the words “semper” (forever) and “Amen.” Mr. Worth, sweating profusely by this point, jumped up and down on the podium to keep the intricate machine moving forward. It was as fine a performance by the Bach Choir as I’ve heard, and there have been many.

In comparison to the “Dixit Dominus,” the singing and playing in the previous pieces were good but not as inspired. The Bach cantatas in particular lacked a certain crispness and authority. That may have been due to the sheer size of the choir, which was probably larger than the forces Bach contemplated, leading to some difficulty with the more intricate passage work. Nonetheless, there were some wonderful moments, such as the final chorus of “Der Herr denket” and the excellent tenor solo in “Aus der Tiefen.”

The concert began with several other excellent solos, all from soprano Carol Menke, the featured singer in Händel’s “Laudate pueri.” She displayed strong command of dynamics and intonation, with convincing crescendos on long notes and equally convincing softer passages. She was particularly good in the lower part of her range, as when singing, “He raiseth up the poor out of the dust.”

Despite that text, no dust was evident in any of the masterpieces on this program. One imagines they’ll still be dust-free 300 years from now.

The reviewer has sung in the Bach Choir and is currently singing in Circa 1600, a chamber choir conducted by Robert Worth.