

# Review of "From Heaven on High"

by Michael Caruso, December 2008

Chestnut Hill continues to be the center of the region's musical celebration of the Christmas season. Alan Harler conducted the Mendelssohn Club in two performances of its annual Christmas concert last Saturday afternoon and evening, December 13, in St. Paul's Episcopal Church. This past Friday night, Piffaro kicked off its series of four renditions of its Christmas program with the first one presented in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. And Valentin Radu led the Camerata Ama Deus in its Christmas program in St. Paul's Church.

This year's installment of the Mendelssohn Club's holiday concert was entitled "From Heaven on High." Centering on the German text, "Vom Himmel hoch," used by Bach, Mendelssohn and W.W. Gilchrist (the Mendelssohn Club's founder), and surrounded by complimentary lyrics and music, the concert cemented Alan Harler's reputation as the region's foremost builder of memorable programs.

Not only did Harler, his singers, the Mendelssohn Brass and organist Michael Stairs offer a little bit of just about everything in the holiday mode, they did so with such perfect balance and cohesion that I found myself wondering why other music directors can't do the same. The mix of old, recent and new -- with audience participation cleverly interspersed throughout -- couldn't have been improved upon -- except by Harler, himself, next year.

The program opened with Felix Mendelssohn's six-movement motet, "Vom Himmel hoch" (From Heaven above to earth I come). Harler and the choir caught the vibrance of the opening chorus with singing that I can only describe as old-fashioned in its fullness of tone and, therefore, exceptionally expressive in its projection of heart, spirit and soul. Baritone (and bass and even tenor later on!) Adrian Kramer sang the aria "Er ist der Herr Christ unser Gott" ('Tis Christ our God who far from high) with expert projection, crisp diction and timbral clarity. Michael Stairs sensitively accompanied him on St. Paul's magnificent Aeolian-Skinner pipe organ, proffering colors both sweet and tart. The chorus sang the chorale "Er bringt euch alle Seligkeit" (He brings those blessings, long ago) with a solidity of purpose reminiscent of the German Lutherans of Mendelssohn's early 19th century. Soprano Jessica Brams-Miller caught the gentility of the aria "Sei willekommt du edler Gast" (Welcome to earth, Thou noble guest), again beautifully accompanied by Stairs via lustrous string stops. Kramer projected a broad spectrum of dynamics to admirable dramatic effect in "Das also hat gefallen dir" (Thus has it pleased Thee to make plain) and the entire chorus gave the final movement, "Lob, Ehr sei Gott imhochsten Thron" (Glory to God in Highest Heaven), a rousing, celebratory rendition.

The program's most challenging work for any choir but especially so for an amateur chorus of 120 singers was the set of excerpts from Bach's "Christmas Oratorio." The master's talent for crafting a catchy melodic motif to communicate humanity's joy at

God's gift of His Son at Christmas is only surpassed by his genius at writing complex counterpoint to surround and enhance it. Both aspects of the choral writing are daunting for even a small, highly trained choir of professional singers, let alone a large volunteer ensemble. It's a challenge met by very few choir directors. Fortunately for those of us living in Greater Philadelphia -- and particularly in Chestnut Hill at this time of year -- Alan Harler is one of those rare choral conductors. His enormous chorus sang the intricate counterpoint as though it were a cathedral choir attuned to singing this music each and every Sunday of the liturgical year. Balance, blend, voicing and texture were immaculately set and flawlessly sustained in all four of the choral numbers. And Adrian Kramer performed both the bass aria "Großer Herr und starker König" (Great Lord and Almighty King) and the short tenor recitative "Und alsobald war da bei dem" (And suddenly there was) expertly.

Gilchrist's anthem "From heaven Above" is both dated and priceless. It catches the fervor of the simpler faith of the late 19th century in sentimental yet heartfelt gestures and lyrical inflections. The choir sang it beautifully with Stairs' accompaniment employing some of the most gorgeous stops on St. Paul's organ. The men of Mendelssohn Club were especially impressive in the opening of the Shaw-Parker arrangement of the ancient chant, "O come, O come, Emmanuel." They arched the long line of the plainsong without a break for breath. The setting's final soft chord was rendered with a haunting hush of tone.

It wouldn't be an Alan Harler program without a world premiere and, sure enough, this one was a winner. Anthony Mosakowski's setting for choir and French horn of the Latin text "Resonet in laudibus" (Let Zion resound in praises) is a lovely motet of chromatic, expressive tonality. The young composer's ear for contrapuntal voicings of smoothly delineated harmonies is exquisite in its precision. And the choir sang it with timbral finesse and impassioned phrasing.

Glenn Rudolph's "The Dream Isaiah Saw" may veer a tad too close to contemporary Broadway music for my own personal tastes in sacred choral music, but its text is a powerful statement of judgement against a heartless society and its musical setting defines the term "effective." It was performed brilliantly, as was Charles Ives' surprisingly simple yet moving "A Christmas Carol."

Alan Harler and the Mendelssohn Club remain Philadelphia's most admirable and exemplary conductor/choral combo. Would that they gave more performances in Chestnut Hill throughout the year.

## **PIFFARO**

This year's Christmas concert by Piffaro, the Renaissance Wind Band, was entitled "Nouvelle, Nouvelle: Christmas in Renaissance France." The program was given four times this season and the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill had the honor of receiving the first on Friday night.

"Nouvelle, Nouvelle" was an especially elaborate affair. Not only did it include Piffaro's seven regular instrumentalists, but four singers and two mime actors were also on hand to lend their lyrical and dramatic contributions to Piffaro's recreation of a Christmas celebration in a small church in a small town in Renaissance France. While not altogether strictly following the Roman Catholic liturgy of the Midnight Mass for Christmas Eve, Piffaro's program came about as close to doing so as one's likely to encounter here in America.

The concert's centerpiece was the setting of the Latin Mass "Voulant honneur" by Claudin de Sermisy, who lived from about 1490 until 1562. Additional works by Pierre Sandrin (1490-1561), Jean Mouton (1459-1522), Jean Maillard (flourished 1538-1554) and Jacques Moderne rounded out the roster of scores. This is music mostly composed prior to the mid-16th century Council of Trent, the Counter Reformation that answered the Protestant Reformation both doctrinally and liturgically. We're not dealing with the timeless masterpieces of composers like Palestrina, Victoria, Tallis and Byrd. Yet Sermisy's setting of the "Kyrie," "Gloria," "Credo," "Sanctus" and "Agnus dei" display an impressive level of craftsmanship, an undeniable gift for melody, a fine hand at counterpoint, and a conceptual concision that many subsequent composers should have emulated.

Interspersed among the settings of the Ordinary of the Mass and the Propers for Christmas Eve were instrumental versions of seasonal motets, the "noels" that enhanced the purely liturgical music of the Mass. Arranged by Piffaro, itself, they all formed a seamless fabric that truly recreated the sound of an ordinary sacred and popular celebration of Christmas, far from the majestic splendor of a Mass in Paris' Cathedral of Notre Dame but no less authentic and probably far more engaging.

The four vocalists enlisted were soprano Laura Heimes, tenors Philip Anderson & Steven Bradshaw, and baritone Brian Ming Chu. I was most impressed by Bradshaw's singing. His light, almost vibrato-less voice was able to sing what often amounted to the alto line in a four-part setting in the original meaning of the term "alto." In cathedral and church choirs of the time, it was the highest adult male voice below that of the treble boys who sang the top line in those cathedral and church choirs during the Renaissance. Bradshaw did not rely on a falsetto in the manner of contemporary countertenors who take the parts originally meant for castrati, mostly in opera. Bradshaw sang in a legitimate tenor voice - - just one that's very high in range, immaculately clear in timbre, and remarkably expressive in projection.

Sabrina Mandell and Mark Jaster of the Happenstance Theater added charm and poignance to the program through their miming of the Christmas story, and all seven of Piffaro's players performed with their typical yet nonetheless amazing versatility, technical wizardry and interpretive vitality.