

Roving Reporter Reviews: San Francisco City Chorus at Trinity Church

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by Gerard Montana

I was talking with another AGO member recently, and we both agreed that we should attend more of the Sunday afternoon concert offerings in the Bay Area. Our excuse was that after a long morning at the console, the only thing we wanted to do was go home and nap on the couch. Upon hearing myself say this out loud, I was reminded of how disappointed I used to be when attendance at my own programs was low. Now I was part of the problem.

Another AGO member was recently quoted as saying that there were so many musical offerings in the Bay Area it was "like Paris." Well, if I were in Paris, I wouldn't be napping. So I got off the couch and went to a concert. And do you know what? It was great!

Most of the fine concerts in the Bay Area happen "under the radar"— they seldom, if ever, get reviewed in the larger newspapers. Are they good or not? Without knowing for sure, I picked this concert because The San Francisco City Chorus was performing pieces by Vaughn-Williams and Finzi. If you missed the program at Trinity Church, San Francisco, on Sunday, November 20, 2005, you missed a truly great concert. By the way, the church was almost full. It was nice to see the enthusiastic crowd.

The City Chorus is composed of 50 voices, and director Larry Marietta gets a balanced, clear, and clean tone from them. Enunciation was exemplary. The men wore tuxedos and the women were in royal blue gowns. They looked great, they sounded better than great.

The AGO was well represented by the great talent of John Walko. The entire program was accompanied on the Trinity Skinner and John's accompaniment was ravishing. He squeezed every orchestral effect possible from the organ and at times my mouth dropped open from the stunning effects. The dialoguing trumpets, the French horn, and those strings were intoxicating. John was fortunate to have the likes of Craig Benner valiantly turning his pages. Brilliant job!

This was a very ambitious program. The program began with *Serenade to Music*. Originally written for 16 solo voices, the full choir handled most of the singing with three soloists filling in the more dramatic solo lines. Mention must be made of soprano Cheryl Keller's performance. Her voice is stunningly beautiful and her interpretation of all her solos was sensitive and musical. Every time she sang I melted in my seat. The sum total of the forces was marvelous.

As if to top that, the next selection was *The Five Mystical Songs*. Baritone Leland Morine's lush and rich voice filled the church with the kind of tone we hope for from a baritone. These are rhythmically tough pieces and there were a few unsure moments from Mr. Morine, but all in all I was captivated.

Later, Vox Delecti, a select group of 14 from the larger chorus, sang five selections. They performed all pieces from memory. This group's tone and ensemble was clear and clean. Its not a big sound, but rather that perfect chamber sound we strive for with our choirs. I questioned the selection of the two bigger works for this small group. They sounded a lot better with the a capella or more intimate works. The *O Clap Your Hands* was less satisfying, and the organ had to be leashed too much to make the piece as effective as it could be. But the Vaughn Williams' *Linden Lea* and *Alleluia* (based on the Prelude on the Rhosymedre tune) as well as the Finzi *My Lovely One* was as good as it gets — luscious. The Gerald Finzi *God Is Gone Up* is a work for a big chorus in a big room with a big organ. It was fun to hear the work again, but it lacked the punch it could have had with the big chorus.

The second half was Vaughn Williams' *Dona Nobis Pacem*. In this time of war it was even more touching than usual. The combination of powerful poetry, thoughts, and music made for a quintessentially perfect experience. If the first half was good, the second half was great. Again soprano Cheryl Keller and Baritone Leland Morine complimented the chorus. John Walko's sensitive accompaniment added an inestimable emotional impact. Larry Marietta lead the ensemble with aplomb. I also want to mention that the extensive program notes by Grace Hughes Chappell were excellent and insightful. My pew-weary behind told me this was a long program, but well worth the time and the little bit of hassle getting to the church. Get out there and support the local talent. Watch someone else sweat for a change.