

CRESCENDO SUPPLIES FINALE

Music Review THE MILLBROOK INDEPENDENT

by Kevin T. McEneaney

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Crescendo at Saint James Place in Great Barrington

As remains traditional in music, the best is saved for the finale, whether chamber music piece or symphony. And it was so for Crescendo's season where new and old blended in splendid rainbow song from an experienced chorus under the direction of Christine Gevert at Saint James Place in Great Barrington, MA.

The chorale program of 15 works revolved around a variety of 1616 motet settings of Psalm 116 and several versions of Psalm 116 by contemporary composers. They opened with *Ricercar* by Dutchman Adrian Willaert (1490-1562), an instrumental.

"*Credidi propter*" by Orlando di Lasso delighted in the upper register of woman singers which dominated the finale, as the work evolved from bass distress to high religious vision in the lilting upper register. A musical interlude, *Sinfonia* by German Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) provided some cheerful breathing room. Three parts of a Schütz motet offered a complex, dialogic interweaving of high and low notes between women and men with the bass line dominant with sonorous vowels; the finale delivered adept blending of both high and low registers. Violinist Emily Hale supplied lovely and frail lyric line.

Soprano soloist Jordan Rose Lee sang with exciting, persuasive, lyric force Juliet Mattila's poem "In Wildness" on Psalm 116 arranged sumptuously by Juan Mesa, who as organist and composer has gathered a considerable following in Boston, Montreal, and Connecticut. While inspired by Thoreau, the poem exhibited the simple crystal concision appropriated by Emily Dickinson: "My soul. Will serve

Nature / as a breaking bud serves / a wilderness of trees.” Mesa’s sensitive setting did the poem justice.

J.S. Bach’s “Chorale,” BWV 93 and 7, and BWV 21/9 featured the trio of soprano Jennifer Tyo, mezzo-soprano Mavis Hsieh, and bass John Cheek sang with unified and moving joy. Christine Gevert encouraged and succeeded in persuading the near-capacity audience to sing the chorus refrain of “If thou but trust in God” with surrounding resonance.

“*Credidi, propter locutus sum*” by Willaert, a double choir motet with soloists alto Mavis Hsieh and bass Jim Barrett antiphonal choir, a technique Willaert invented. Hsieh delivered aspiration while Barrett contributed deep emotional gravitas as the polychoral singers swept into a sober “Amen.” To complete the first half, Johann Bach’s Double Choir organ motet “*Sey nun wieder zufrieden*” was supplemented by superb fingering by Hideki Yamaya on giant theorbo. Once more Jim Barrett held forth with impressive voice.

Two instrumental dances by Christoph Demantius (1567-1643) opened the second half with the lively fanfare of three sackbuts played by Liza Malamut, Mack Ramsey, and Simon Wood. A Demantius motet in German offered rational persuasion as religious devotion where concise lyric energy had poetic impact as arrangement highlighted text.

“My Heart is Full,” a contemporary poem by Francis Roth, set by Johnny Priano, brought a modern immediacy to Psalm 116. Roth’s minimalism was enhanced by the ethereal spirituality that Priano brought to the poem which concludes “I sit on the edge of / the universe and listen / for what will come.” That receptive openness to the spiritual life in this poem remains remarkable. Roth sat a few rows behind me in the audience with her smiling and admiring daughter.

Selected lines from a contemporary poem by Bruce McEver, “The Double Octagon After Psalm 116,” was set for chorale and ensemble by Cheng-Chia Wu, who was present in the audience. Tenor Stephen Hassmer soloed with ambient emotional undertone. The last two stanzas of the poem were arranged by Christine Gevert, eloquently concluding with “You are, always with us / alive, vast and behind it all.” This was the World Premiere of this co-arrangement, which has—as they say—legs, and will likely have many more performances in various venues.

The glorious finale was left to Johann Hermann Schein with “*Canzon Corollarium*” on Psalm 116. The sprightly dance rhythms of this piece freighted more sunlight than shadows in its interpretation of the psalm. The music is through composed, unlike the dramatic divisions of the other motets sung. The lyrics ring with homophonic elegance complimented by gradual build-up to a sensational and fitting shout of joy in ecstatic “Alleluja! Alleluja!”

The balanced back-and-forth of Baroque and Contemporary with complimentary innovation and scintillating contrasts provided the most delightful and nuanced concert of Crescendo’s season. There was no slack in the thrill of these consecutive pieces. The chorus was in superb voice. I m perplexed to wonder what marvel Christine Gevert will discover to overshadow this, both in execution and matter, Alleluia!

This concert will be replicated at Trinity Church in Limerock, CT, at 6 pm this Saturday.