

Christmas Remembered
Nationalisms and Christmas
All-American Scots and Germans
By Paul M. Somers

December 5, 2004

Schola Cantorum on Hudson, Deborah Simpkin King (conductor). "Home for the Holidays - An American Christmas." Billings, Appalachian, Native American, Spirituals, Lauridsen, pop, and more. St. Michael R. C. Church, Jersey City.

December 11, 2004

Schwäbischer Sängerbund, Manfred Knoop (conductor), Virginia Herrera (soprano), Bruce Crilly (tenor), Adlemo Guidarelli (baritone), Elaine Christy (harp), Patricia Davila (flute), Carol Capor (organ), Peter Candella (piano), Royal Brass Ensemble, and orchestra. Many Christmas selections both German and from other sources. Presbyterian Church, Westfield.

December 18, 2004

Clan Currie Society. "The Pipes of Christmas" with the Kevin Ray Blandford Memorial Pipe Band, Matt Nonnemacher (pipe major and solo piper); Jennnifer Port (harp); Paul Woodiel (fiddle), Susie Petrov (piano), Isaac Alderson (uilleann pipes); Summit Music Festival Chamber Choir, Jason Tramm (director); Solid Brass, Douglas Haislip (director, trumpet); Jeffrey H. Rickard (organ and piano); Susan Porterfield Currie (narrator), Ronnie Stewart and Frederick C. Clark (readers). Central Presbyterian Church, Summit.

Such a wide variety of musical Christmas celebrations would occur only in America. It was quite remarkable that the German and Scottish programs borrowed heavily from other nationalities while the American program did all its borrowing through influences. It was also curious that the all-American program by the Schola Cantorum on Hudson was in urban Jersey City while the Scottish Clan Currie's "Pipes of Christmas" and German Schwäbische Sängerbund programs were in affluent Summit and Westfield respectively.

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. . . The Schola's American Christmas, too, ended on a literal high note, though a religious one. As an encore they sang a very engaging arrangement I had never before heard of the Spiritual *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. It sent one of the sopranos up to a ringing high note on the last chord. What a "wow" way to conclude!

But the printed program ended with another "wow," this one secular. Soprano Crystal A. Charles was the soloist in the famed Roy Ringwald arrangement of *The Christmas Song* by Mel "The Velvet Fog" Torme and Robert Wells. Taking nothing away from any of the previous soloists, Ms. Charles was the happy surprise of the afternoon.

In a concert which was mostly sacred music, the most telling demonstration of Schola's solid pitch was in the old favorite pop song *I'll Be Home for Christmas*, from which they borrowed the title of the whole concert. After a long period of *a cappella singing, the piano came in and the singers were not even the tiniest fraction out of tune. That is not at all easy to accomplish.

I was quite taken with [Wondrous Night] by Gordon King. It uses the familiar *Silent Night* text but in a stark setting which is not *strophic but has a long-term goal which is achieved skillfully.

J. Mark Dunn's *Carol of the Rose* was expressive, featuring *imitation, *modal writing, less than usual harmonies, and a striking use of *open fifths.

Probably the least-known among a program including some little-known mountain music was a most evocative Huron carol *'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime* arranged by Sally Ann Morris with an affecting use of drum and vocal *drones. Among the composed works (not folksong arrangements), surely the most famous is Morton Lauridsen's *O Magnum Mysterium*. His expressive use of *tone clusters and *extended harmonies allowed conductor Deborah Simpkin King to bring from the singers the most lush sound of the afternoon, yet its richness was rooted in clean singing.

This reviewer will admit to being a sucker for the early American *fuging tunes and other music by the likes of Billings, Stephenson, and Ingalls. These songs, which were the first set, were sung with virility mixed with grace. The set was labeled "Christmas in Revolutionary Times", but sadly did not include anything from the 18th century Moravian composers whose chorales and anthems for Christmas are numerous and first-rate. For those who might argue that they were really German, it must be pointed out that it was the North Carolina Moravians who held the first recorded celebration of July 4. You can't get more American than that!

The processional was the perennial favorite by Elizabeth Poston, *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*. As the singers walked down the aisle there were sounds of finger cymbals. At one point the tune was sung in *canon with the cymbal strikes random so it sounded like wind-chimes - quite an effect.

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