

From the Orkneys to Cardiff
Scotland the Brave to Suo Gan
Sunday, March 28, 2004
By John Hammel

St. John's Arts & Spirituality Initiative. Schola Cantorum on Hudson, Dr. Deborah Simpkin King (conductor), Sebastian Cornut (piano). "Celtic Cousins: Music of Scotland and Wales". St. John's Episcopal Church Montclair.

What an appropriate way to spend a Sunday afternoon in early spring: listening to Scottish and Welsh music lovingly performed with meticulous care and execution. Dr. Deborah Simpkin King's Schola Cantorum on Hudson was the epitome of mellifluously elegant ensemble singing with the most warmly rounded *bel canto *cantabile blend I have ever heard in live choral singing. Leading a smallish choir of approximately thirty singers, Dr. King was able to control and mold the phrasing and musical structure with exactitude and care, providing a sonorously rich and vibrant sound that resonated aptly throughout the St. John's parish hall. The acoustic of the hall was reverberant without being boomy, consisting of a wooden floor augmented by plaster walls and a high A-framed arch ceiling criss-crossed with large wooden beams. This offered a warmly enveloping ambience that aided in the impeccable incisive diction of the choir. Every word throughout the afternoon's performance was projected with clarity and understanding. Texts were not offered in the program and none were needed.

Another outstanding attribute of this choir was the softened impact of their singing. Dr. King built her *crescendos and *fortes magnificently. When a forte was delivered it was still rounded and warm imbuing the piece being performed with a wonderfully full but never strident quality that left a tingle in the ear.

The medley of Scottish favorites, which began the program, featured Nicolas Cerratos's apt and vigorous drumming and three basses from the choir – Mark I. Davies, Jim Gard, and Roger West - who blended well together but evidenced a slight strain on some of the top notes of their phrases, most probably the result of not being warmed up enough at the start of the concert. The four numbers *Sterling Bridge*, *Scotland The Brave*, *Flower of Scotland* and *Auld Lang Syne* (with the audience joining in for the final stanza), offered wonderful closed mouth humming by the women, a homogeneously rustic sound in *Flower of Scotland* and superb *suspensions in the soprano line behind the rest of the choir in *Auld Lang Syne*. Dr. King's beat was crystalline.

The second section's highlights of Scottish folksongs were noteworthy for the vocal bagpipe drone created by the men in *By Yon Bonnie Banks*. Also featured was the flowing *legato of baritone Mark I. Davies, (who showed no signs of strain on this number) and the rich timbre of soprano Crystal A. Charles, whose singing belied her age of sixteen. One was left with a desire to hear more of her voice in the future. The chiming effect of individual voices from within the choir towards the end of the piece was also quite arresting.

The other folksongs in the set were delivered with meticulous blend, fine counterpoint and lovely pianissimo singing. The soloists, tenor Paul Villarreal, soprano Bernadette Oberndorf, and tenor Alexander Wentworth all acquitted themselves with apt folksy flavor.

Dr. King presented a set of 20th century sacred works that were revelatory in their musical nature. Ian Parrott's *O! Lord Our Sovereign* (1991), offered a wide palette of vocal coloring. He had the voices rising in painterly fashion on the words, "to the heavens," with appropriate building of the line from *piano to *forte without sounding hackneyed. The round on the words oh what is man was refreshing both in its composition and execution by the choir. Tenor Paul Villareal and soprano Anne McNaughton delivered their solo lines appealingly with sweet tones.

Dilys Elwyn-Edwards' setting of *Psalm 23* (1988) offered a text setting that was as highly effective as the music was reverently constructed. This piece should continue to find its way into the choral repertoire with relative ease.

A Babe Is Born, Op. 55 (1971) by William Mathias gave Dr. King more opportunity to highlight the attractive characteristics of her chorus: effectively rendered *crescendos and *decrescendos, excellent diction, and superb line and balance. All three of the sacred works were new to me and the intermission crowd was abuzz with praise.

The second half of the program was a potpourri of Welsh part-songs, folksongs, and hymns. The part-song section, the first three of the four sung *a cappella, began with Robert Smith's *The Winds Lament* (1991). The choir entrance was a close-mouthed hum, which was utilized again for the finale. In the middle of the piece they provided wonderful shape and flow, breezily sung (pun intended) *cantabile lines and a clear, forwardly projected solo from soprano Sherry Kosinski.

Mansel Thomas' *Daffodils* (1939) was rendered with clean, crisp diction by the choir with gorgeously close harmonies. Dilys Elwyn-Edwards' second offering on the program, *Spring, The Sweet Spring* (1985) was euphonious and affecting. William Mathias' Three Part-Songs, op. 12 (2002), was a trio of tunes that were characterized by distinctive qualities. "Night and Morning" with rippling piano *arpeggios and effective chromatics struck me as impressionistic and would make a great solo art song setting. "The Gipsy," another tune with pianistic cascading arpeggios, was more robust fare for the choir, thrillingly sung. The last tune, "The Tree on the Hill," with its nonsensical lyrics and Twelve-Days-of-Christmas repetitive style, was a tour de force of choral writing and singing. Again, the Schola's diction was exemplary and Dr. King's ability to build dynamics with beautifully shaped and highly charged crescendos was utterly peerless. When called upon to sing grace notes preceding trills, they choir tossed them off with ease. Soprano Caroline L. Sargent's short solo was stylish and cleanly sung. Sebastien Cornut's piano playing was supportive and flavorful.

The Welsh folksongs were all sung a cappella without loss of intonation and balance. The third in the series, *Swansea Town* was a gorgeously sung lullaby with a sonority that was never forced, pushed or pinched at either extreme of range. Dynamic nuances in all of the songs were simply exquisite. Other tunes in this set were *My Love Is A Venus*, *All Through The Night*, *Suo Gan*, and *Hunting the Fox*.

The afternoon concluded with a medley trio of Welsh hymns, all sung with fluency and fluidity. The arrangement by Dr. King was dramatically incisive with shifts through the key changes that were alternately seamless and compelling. The wordless soprano descant in *Hyfrydol*, the hymn-tune by Rowland Hugh Pritchard, was absolutely thrilling. The concert's built in encore, the Welsh national anthem

Land of our Fathers, was vigorously sung and left the audience satisfied without the heaviness of satiety.

This is a relatively young choir, only founded in the fall of 1995. They offer a distinctive and accomplished sound that is well worth seeking out by choral music lovers in the Garden State. For more information about this excellent organization, visit their website at www.scholaonhudson.org.

[Return to CNJS Home Page](#) | [Return to Reviews Table of Contents](#)