

## SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL CONCERT REVIEW

**The Crossing:** Mark Anderson (organ), Donald Nally (conductor), The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 21.12.2007

**Andrew Gant:** *What child is this* (1995/2007)

**James MacMillan:** *Tremunt videntes angeli* (2002)

**Judith Bingham:** *The clouded heaven* (1998)

**Don Michael Dicie:** *Star unto glory* (2006)

**John Paynter:** *The Rose* (1969)

**Colin Mawby:** *How far is it to Bethlehem* (1996)

**Kerry Andrew:** *Hevene Quene* (2006)

**Kenneth Leighton:** *A Christmas Caroll* (1954)

**Kenneth Leighton:** *O leave your sheep* (1963)

**John Tavener:** *A nativity* (1985)

**David Shapiro:** *Et incarnatus est* (2007, world premiere)

**Patrick Hadley:** *I sing of a maiden* (1936)

**Thomas Adès:** *The Fayrfax Carol* (1997)

**Jonathan Varcoe:** *Lullay lullay little child* (1990)

**Jonathan Dove:** *Wellcome, all wonders in one sight!* (1999)

**R. Brant Ruggles** (arr.): *What child is this* (1971)

If there were any small complaints about this exceptional program by The Crossing, it might be that some of the selections—all superb—were a little too similar to each other in texture, and in tempo. But given the obscurity of the repertoire, with director Donald Nally culling over half of the program from the last twenty years, it may be churlish to complain. And along with the superb acoustics of The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, the group had the good fortune to enlist Mark Anderson, the church's organist, adroitly showing off the instrument's versatility and power.

Several high points came early in the evening, with a gently chromatic arrangement of *What child is this* by Andrew Gant, composer, choirmaster and organist at the Chapel Royal in Windsor, UK. Immediately after, a friend next to me whispered, "These guys are really good," and who could argue, presented with exquisite control, precision tuning and phrasing that makes you re-evaluate the capabilities of the human voice. In a one-two punch, they followed this with James MacMillan's *Tremunt videntes angeli*, opening with the evening's most threatening rumble. MacMillan often goes for stylistic extremes: amid the grace notes of a "Scotch snap" rhythm, he sends the women's melodic line far up into the sky, while the men improvise on pre-selected pitches.

As the murmuring ending died away, Judith Bingham's *The clouded heaven* moved into view, with its rapturous lines, again for very high sopranos. Somehow Bingham in effect vaulted us into orbit high above the earth for a serene take on the planet. The choir's ethereal tone was never used more dramatically than here. Don Michael Dicie's *Star unto glory* has the simplicity

of chant, while John Paynter plays with close chords in *The Rose*. Colin Mawby's *How far is it to Bethlehem* has the candor of a child's song, while two Kenneth Leighton gems, written in the 1950s and 1960s, sounded considerably ahead of their time. Kerry Andrew's powerful *Hevene Quene* makes its impact with some shattering, complex chords.

It took just two months for David Shapiro to write his stirring *Et incarnatus est*, gently flowing until its surprising resolution on a major chord. He must have been thrilled to hear it sung with such exactitude. The choir's women followed with yet more pristine work in *I sing of a maiden* by Patrick Hadley and later *A nativity* by John Tavener. Thomas Adès's *The Fayrfax Carol* provided some much-needed stylistic contrast, with its huge intervallic leaps and precarious entrances that members of the group plucked seemingly out of nowhere. (This may have been the most atonal work of the night.) Adès often uses the framework of a traditional English carol, evoking some jolly high spirits, but his polyphony is straight out of the late 20th century. As a sort of contemplative balm, the concert closed with a mellow set by Jonathan Varcoe, Jonathan Dove, and R. Brant Ruggles, whose velvety reharmonization of *What child is this* once again drew the ear to the group's outstanding female singers.

As the applause died down, Nally announced an encore, "our national anthem." I couldn't stifle a chuckle, trying to guess what he was up to, until I recognized the quietly pungent opening bars of Morten Lauridsen's *O magnum mysterium*. Since its premiere in 1994 by the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Lauridsen's opus has been one of the most popular choral works in the United States, receiving thousands of performances. I glanced at the man listening next to me, sitting lost in thought. He later confided that in the previous week he had heard it done by a less-than-stellar choir, and how satisfying it was to hear this small icon of ecstasy repeated here, with such overwhelming artistry.

***Bruce Hodges***