

ROGUE VALLEY CHORALE & SOUTHERN OREGON REPERTORY SINGERS

Singing the Season

Too often the Christmas season falls prey to commercial excess, marring the spirit of joyfulness associated with Jesus' birth. Fortunately, for those seeking to celebrate the season in a more traditional manner, two concerts offered by the Rogue Valley Chorale and the Southern Oregon Repertory Singers showed how song can restore some of what the season is supposed to represent.

The Rogue Valley Chorale, under the direction of Lynn Sjolund and performing in Medford's First Presbyterian Church, presented a program which demonstrated the richness of Christmas, drawing on carols of other nations, opening with three from Latvia. These focused on nature's role in the Christmas story, while others, such as the Swedish dance carol, "Nur Ar Det Jul Igen," set heads swaying to its bouncy rhythm. The selections seemed to say that part of the season's beauty derives from its variety.

The spiritual message gained strength with Benjamin Britten's great opus 30, "Rejoice in the Lamb," a work whose artistry is matched by its charm. The text is from "Jubilate Agno" written by the 18th century English poet, Christopher Smart, who is remembered as much for his madness as for his eccentric religious verse.

It is a marvelously visual piece as Britten's music draws forth Smart's poetic images of God's flora and fauna. Notable were Linda Fountain's deft solo illustrating Jeoffrey the cat, as well as Eric Smith's recitative. Linda Borecki made good use of the handsome Schoenstein organ's capability to evoke Britten's radiant musical lines.

Ottorino Respighi's "Laud to the Nativity" is based on a 13th century poetic text. The Chorale was joined in this performance by Debra Guy and Penny Austin on flute; Irene Fitch, oboe; Karen Basin and Erika Anderson, bassoon; Nancy Purdy, triangle; and Kenton Gould, English horn. The timbre of



The Rogue Valley Chorale under the direction of Lynn Sjolund

the English horn matches the mood of the music, so its presence did much to bolster the spirit of this piece, aided by nice work on the part of Gould. Soprano Lynn Fountain, pressed into service because of Kathryn Gordon's sudden illness, portrayed a credible Mary, giving support to the Chorus' line "Thy birth here may never be forgotten." The reed ensemble combined with the Chorale gave deserved fullness to this fine work.

The program closed with "Jesus Christ, the Apple Tree" a work that Sjolund claims is becoming the Chorale's signature. It is a lovely song, like a lullaby really, which rounded out the gentle spirit so capably expressed by these fine singers throughout the evening.

More fine singing continued, this time from the Southern Oregon Repertory Singers in concert at the Music Recital Hall, on the campus of Southern Oregon State College. This group smaller than the Chorale, and under the direction of Dr. Paul French (Associate Profes-

sor of Music at SOSO), represents the kind of tight, disciplined vocalizing associated with plainsong or madrigal singing.

The program was titled "A European Christmas" and reflected music from across Europe and England, with a sidestep into Appalachia. The evening began with a

hymn-like song by Sethus Calvisius, followed by a work of beautiful harmonies, "O nata lux de lumine" by English composer Thomas Tallis. A heartfelt rendering of Palestrina's "Hodie Christus natus est" explains how he alone was able to break the yoke of musical orthodoxy in the middle ages and to be decreed "Prince of Music" by the Pope. These songs were performed with the kind of musical control that separates plainsong from plain singing.

This control came through very strongly in Olivier Messiaen's "O sacrum convivium." Here the voices sounded as one, evoking the idea that the voice, in early music especially, had a dual function, there

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being no instrumental accompaniment. It was one of those crystalline moments that makes applause superfluous, more of an interruption than a laud.

Unfortunately, the J. S. Bach "Gloria in excelsis Deo" suffered from weak accompaniment, though soprano Linda Wegner and tenor Roger Graves delivered solid performances in this most glorious of Bach's cantatas.

Singing "I Wonder as I Wander," soprano Becky Voris captured the audience as she projected the directness that drives that uniquely American carol. Following, Dr. French presented an incredibly beautiful arrangement of "Silent Night" which might just make the usual one never seem right again. Presenting new arrangements of familiar tunes and exploring different musical time zones are more than a means to stretch an audience. These are reasons that the

Southern Oregon Repertory Singers are gaining recognition. In March the group will perform, by invitation, at the American Choral Directors Association Northwest Division convention in Tacoma. Its been twenty years since a local choir appeared; a long time but, worth the wait.

—BARBARA RYBERG

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