

Concert review: Chamber choir, orchestra open Holy Week with musical journey

Vox Philia and Berks Sinfonietta collaborate on a program in West Reading focused on the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

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Vox Philia and Berks Sinfonietta opened Holy Week with a deeply sacred concert, Sunday afternoon in Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church in West Reading that took the audience on a journey through a time of penance, forgiveness and contemplation leading up to Easter.

Led by the founder and artistic director of both groups, David A. McConnell, the chamber choir and small orchestra delved into some profound literature that contains riches for believers and unbelievers alike, although it all focuses on texts used in services for Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, all having to do with the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

"Music for Passiontide" opened with a hymn from the Book of Common Prayer, "Remember Not Lord, Our Offences," set by 17th-century English composer Henry Purcell, beautifully sung by Vox Philia, unaccompanied, in luxurious, winding lines.

Anton Bruckner's a cappella "Christus factus est," an economical text on Christ's sacrifice and subsequent exaltation, followed, its downward trajectory to the cross and floating sopranos in the second half meticulously conducted and sung.

Arvo Part's "Fratres," an instrumental interlude, employed a drone in the bass, overlaid with clear, icy strings and spare percussion to create a profoundly meditative piece that evoked a leafless, forested landscape. Performed with pure tones and intense concentration, this work was elemental, sturdy and simple like a Shaker chair or a medieval chant or a deep, lung-filling breath.

Maurice Durufle's "Ubi caritas," which centers on Christ's love, enveloped the listeners in a plainsong-inspired warm vocal embrace.

The next segment inserted Mozart's sorrowful, sublime "Ave verum corpus," conducted by Emily Fredericks, with the orchestra, between Parts 1 and 2 of Thomas Tallis' "Lamentations of Jeremiah," an a cappella work which describes Jerusalem as an abandoned woman, betrayed and forlorn, and mourns the captivity of the Jewish people by the Babylonians.

The Mozart was given an ethereal performance; the Tallis, with the tragic lines that only a Renaissance composer could produce, was full of emotion, although the choir lost focus halfway through Part 2, regaining it for the final section.

Part's miraculous "Stabat Mater," performed by smaller ensembles from both groups, ended the program with a trip into the Stations of the Cross and the heart of pain and grief. Beginning with keening violins and sopranos in the highest range, the piece, in triple meter and in three-line stanzas, uses the most economical means to create an intense experience.

With their purity of tone and extremes of treble and bass, the performers were able to achieve a mystical, other-worldly soundscape in which time and space were altered.

Prior to the "Stabat Mater," Sacred Heart's pastor, Monsignor Joseph DeSantis, explained the meaning and use of the text in the Mass, and of the Stations of the Cross, which depict Christ's journey from trial to crucifixion.

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