

Good Friday with Thirteen Strings



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13 Strings Easter concert At Dominion Chalmers Reviewed Friday night

Thirteen Strings joined up with a brace of guest vocalists Good Friday for an evening of Baroque sacred music. While Bach's Passions and Easter cantatas are the usual early music go-tos at this time of year, Kevin Mallon marked the holiday with two works each by Handel, Vivaldi, and Jan Dismas Zelenka.

Handel's Concerto Grosso Op. 6 No. 2 opened the evening somewhat tentatively. Yes, Mallon shaped supple phrases that were full of courtly grace and tasteful ornamentation, and the interplay between the first and second violin soloists (Manuela Milani and Solange Tremblay) was charming. But transitions lacked confidence, and attacks were not always sharp and decisive.

Czech composer Jan Dismas Zelenka, a contemporary of Bach's who was chiefly active in Dresden, wrote music of extraordinary verve and daring. Two motets for solo voice and orchestra—Lamentation no.1 for tenor and O Magnum Mysterium for alto—showed what a maverick he was for the time.

Charles Sy's distinctive, attractive tenor sounds better and better the higher he sings, with upper notes of rare sweetness and smiling ease. Some inconsistencies in vocal technique—a tendency to fade and strain in his lower register, imprecise melismas—were not that surprising in such a young singer, and they did not distract from his promising qualities. In this work, Zelenka's virtuosity as a bass player was also evident in the remarkable duet for a pair of cellos, beautifully played by Julian Armour and Thaddeus Morden.

Soprano Jennifer Taverner



O Magnum Mysterium, a lullaby to the baby Jesus in the manger, was an incongruous choice for Easter. But it was a pleasure to hear countertenor Daniel Cabena's gentle, elegant singing, supported by an especially fine sensitivity to the text.

Jennifer Taverner lent her clear but warm and enveloping soprano to two Vivaldi motets. Her virtuoso coloratura technique was deployed almost excessively in Ascende Laeta—she piled on the runs and ornaments to the point where it no longer flattered the music. The Salve Regina was much better served, with restraint and greater sincerity of feeling.

Seventeen Voyces joined the orchestra and soloists for Handel's "Queen Caroline" Te Deum. What should have been the concert's highlight fell rather flat. There were not enough choristers—not even the full 17—to provide a sense of jubilant celebration. Cabena was the most solid soloist here: Sy's intonation wandered, while bass Alexander Dobson just sounded aggressively loud. And overall the performance lacked Handelian drama, tension and excitement.