

Review: Kairos: A Consort of Singers

By **JAMES F. COTTER**

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POUGHKEEPSIE — Sunday afternoon at the Vassar College Chapel, Kairos: A Consort of Singers, under the direction of Edward Lundergan, concluded its 15th anniversary celebration of a Bach Cantata Series with performances of Bach's "Magnificat" and Handel's "Dixit Dominus."

Accompanied by a chamber orchestra of 21 members, the 19 singers sang the Latin liturgical hymns with clear articulation, emphatic intonation and smooth modulation. Obviously, this group knows how to bring these classic works to life as words of spirit, truth and beauty, and they do so with attention to surface detail and inner emotion. The concert was also performed the previous evening at the Reformed Church of New Paltz.

The nine verses of Psalm 109, beginning with "Dixit Dominus" ("The Lord said to my Lord") and ending with the "Gloria Patri," are a Messianic hymn that young Handel set to music with opera, plainchant and concerto writing in mind. Chorus and soloists alternated with orchestral accompaniment to combine in fugues and a variety of vocal and string combinations that make the psalm a subject of prayer and musical fascination.

In the opening passage the chorus shared with three soloists, Callie Hershey, Tricia Lewis Algar and Glenn Knickerbocker, the call to "make your enemies your footstool" of heavenly victory. This was followed by alto Patricia Marquez's aria promising kingship and soprano Carol Lundergan's aria declaring "before the rising of the daystar, I have begotten thee." This lovely sequence gave way to the choral jubilation of "Juravit Dominus" ("The Lord has sworn") and reverent "Tu es sacerdos" ("You are a priest forever"), both sung with power and conviction.

The next half of the psalm joined sopranos Christine Howlett and Lundergan with tenor John Hedges, alto Kathryn Stewart and bass William Ashby in "Dominus a dextris tuis" ("Lord at your right hand"). Two choral sections offered dramatic climaxes with polyphonic visions of ruin in "Judicabit in nationibus" ("He shall judge nations") and staccato exclamations in "Conquassabit capita" ("He shall scatter skulls").

Sopranos Shana Andrawis and Kathen Cowan sang "De torrente in via bibet" ("He shall drink of the torrent in his way") over bass string counterpoint and male voices with notes that rang of dripping water and rushing sound. The final Gloria rose to joyful heights of celebration.

After intermission, Bach's "Magnificat" in 12 sections sets to music the canticle of the Annunciation from Luke's Gospel. Trumpets and timpani supported singers in the opening exclamation of praise, and then sopranos Howlett in mellow tones and Amy Littler with crystal high notes took up the words of Mary. Choral voices interrupted with a forceful proclamation of "Omnes generations" ("All generations") until baritone Michael Saunders declared the great things God has done. Tenor Scott Borden and alto Patricia Marquez formed a duet with strings and organ in support to plead for God's mercy.

At midpoint, "Fecit potentiam" ("He has shown strength") set off a fugal storm with a choral attack that tenor Knickerbocker enforced and alto Algar modulated with flute and oboe accompanied arias. Female voices furthered the sense of serenity in "Suscepit Israel" ("He has helped Israel"), and the full chorus summed up the hymn with "Sicut locutus est" ("So it was spoken"). The final Gloria called back trumpets and timpani for a mighty recapitulation of praise.

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