

Choirs of the West
Choral Arts Northwest &
Vancouver Chamber Choir in
concert
Friday, October 19, 8pm
Chan Centre for the
Performing Arts
by Colin MacDonald

The history of choral composition is closely tied to the Christian church, as choirs have been present in religious services since the time of Pope Gregory. That sacred tradition was still evident in the joint concert of the Vancouver Chamber Choir and Seattle's Choral Arts Northwest, as nine of the ten works on the program had a liturgical theme. At moments the Chan Centre seemed too profane a setting for the chosen music, but the hall's natural resonance still allowed the audience to ascend to heaven on a cloud of voices.

Both choirs joined forces under conductor Jon Washburn, to open the program with *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit an*, BWV 226, by Johann Sebastian Bach. The intricacies of Bach's counterpoint became lost in a muddy wash of reverb from the hall, and although the combined groups sang accurately, in this case a smaller ensemble would have helped add clarity to the performance. A better choice of repertoire was Pablo Casals' *O vos omnes*. With beautiful harmonies gently coloured by chromaticisms à la Samuel Barber, this was a work of weary suffering and pleading lamentation by the famous Spanish cellist. The massed choir had a rich, full sound, and a strong control of the subtle chordal tuning.

Choral Arts Northwest, with conductor Richard Sparks, were featured on their own in Johannes Brahms' *Warum ist das Licht gegeben*. A composition in

memoriam, Brahms' counterpoint showed the influence of Bach's writing, while coloured with melancholic harmonies. Sparks wrought a performance of crystalline ensemble work and purely tuned chords, but failed to reach the emotional depths of pathos and heights of redemption, and ultimately the piece was evenly flat. That ensemble control was better served in the contemporary work *Hymn to the Creator of Light*, by John Rutter. This fascinating work opened with a rich palette of dissonance, progressing to more spacious, Copelandesque harmonies, as light was charted from its full spectrum down to pure white. Choral Arts Northwest performed with confidence under very challenging tuning circumstances.

John Washburn guided the Vancouver Chamber Choir in their own set. Having been newly received into the Order of Canada on October 17th, Washburn was in a cheerful mood, and the choir was relaxed with the home ground advantage. Henry Purcell's *Hear my prayer, O Lord* revealed the individual sound of the VCC, less homophonic but with more personality coming through. *My Prayer*, by Bob Chilcott, set the same text as Purcell with a more introspective spirituality, and rolled along with inventive polyrhythmic variations. R. Murray Schafer's *Alleluia* broke from traditional choral writing in a mystical celebration of divinity. An initial birdsong-like statement extended into melismas that moved in and out of phase, creating a kaleidoscope of sound, and demanding very nimble performances from the singers.

Richard Sparks returned to the stage to lead the combined choirs again in Herbert Howells' *Requiem*. The large group performed with precision, but was

too careful, and failed to communicate true sorrow, and more rehearsal time would have been needed to achieve an emotionally moving performance. In this case, bigger was not necessarily better.