

Sacramento Choral Society and Orchestra Presents "English Grandeur"
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by E. Haig

There was a sense of a homecoming in the return of the Sacramento Choral Society and Orchestra to the Community Center Theater last weekend when the organization presented its "English Grandeur" concert to a large, if not quite capacity, audience. Part of the excitement was probably caused by the impressive number of people on the stage, rather than the number in the audience, for almost 300 singers and orchestra members performed for the first part of the concert.

On the stage was the 60 member professional orchestra (which has now received over two million dollars in salary payments over the sixteen year history of the organization), the Sacramento Children's Chorus (directed by Lynn Stevens), and, of course, the 150 singers who comprise the largest choral ensemble in this or probably any other metropolitan community.

Together they performed a pair of Vaughan Williams compositions: "A Song of Thanksgiving," which featured a lovely soprano solo sung by Carrie Hennessey and a narration (impeccably delivered by Kirk Blackinton); and "Five Mystical Songs," which marked its area premier as we learned after the concert in conversation with SCSO long-time president James McCormick.

Both of these works are of the "Praise the Lord" variety and therefore can seem a bit repetitious (at least as to their lyrics, which were provided in graphics shown above the stage; a nice touch, even if they weren't all that necessary with the lyrics in English). But both also offered some impressive moments for both the singers and the orchestra.

On the "Song of Thanksgiving," an excellent trumpet solo was played by Michael Meeks, and the children's chorus blended nicely with the coloratura offerings of Ms. Hennessey, whose smile alone was enough to convey the joyous spirit intended by the composer.

The "Five Mystical Songs" is a more complex work. With lyrics drawn from the poetry of George Herbert, the songs depict the Christian attitude towards God. The first four of the songs require a strong bass/baritone soloist, and in Clayton Brainerd, Maestro Donald Kendrick certainly had one.

Mr. Brainerd, who is physically a very big man (we'd guess around 6'8"), possesses a surprisingly tender voice that, while not incapable of booming when necessary, seemed more comfortable with the softer passages in the songs. He delivered them beautifully.

The fifth of the songs ("Antiphon") is sung entirely by the chorus, and here the voices soared majestically as the spirit of the song's lyrics require.

Another work heavy on holy praise, "Let the People Praise Thee, O God," closed the first half of the concert. It again featured the brass section of the orchestra and the chorus, which sang flawlessly.

If the first part of the concert was impressive, the single work that comprised the second half was spectacular (both as conceived and as performed). William Walton's "Belshazzar's Feast" tells the Old Testament story of the desecration of the Jewish worship of their God by the Babylonian king's praise of his heathen gods at a massive feast he hosts.

The work is a marvel of orchestral composition with no small amount of challenge for the chorus and soloist (again, Mr. Brainerd, masterful in every respect) as well. The piece is not so much a religious work, although it is drawn from the Biblical story, as it is a story with religious overtones. The sudden death of the king is certainly something of a miracle in the story, but it resonated as more of a dramatic denouement in the SCSO performance.

The orchestra's closing coda was the stuff to get your blood flowing and your heart pumping, as was much of this excellent concert, ably conducted, as always, by Donald Kendrick, who has brought so many great choral works to life with this organization that he has ably led for all sixteen years of its existence.