



## God Is in the Music

BY FRED KIRSHNIT

One of the many unsolicited press releases that I received this month reassured me that although their client's concert had the word "Christmas" in its title, the event itself was completely devoid of religious content and therefore suitable for the entire family. This missive was quickly filed where it belonged, but piqued my thirst for a good, old-fashioned Christmas concert combining the sacred and the festive. On Sunday night, at the Metropolitan Museum, that particular itch was scratched.

The concert by the Choral Society of Grace Church was held in the Medieval Sculpture Hall, a quasi-religious setting filled with tapestries and statuary from a time imbued with the spirit of the trinity. Those familiar with the Metropolitan Opera's production of Verdi's "Don Carlo" will know how imposing is the imperial gate in this room, in this case forming a background wherein even St. Peter would be comfortable. The museum's Northern European Christmas tree, decorated with a cherubic motif, was also present and under it was their fabulous Neapolitan Baroque crèche.

I assumed that this would be a pleasing concert, although an amateur one. I was wrong. It was magnificent.

There was approximately an equal number of singers as audience members in this small room, and the museum handled the demand for tickets by mounting two complete shows both of which sold out. A space of less than three feet separated some of the erect singers and their seated listeners, but the warmth of

the acoustics, with a soupçon of echo effect, kept the music from becoming overwhelming. The brass quintet had little choice but to sit in front of the chorus, dangerously close to patrons in the front row, but mastered the arcane art, especially counter-intuitive to brass players, of intoning softly but expressively.

It has become fashionable in our short attention span society for godless critics to disparage the works of Anton Bruckner. His music is anathema in an age of apostasy because it comes as close as humanly possible to expressing the timelessness and splendor of the triune and develops its ideas in an unhurried, teleological manner. In my view of heaven, when we Brucknerians die, the first thing that we get to hear is the finale of his unfinished Ninth Symphony.

I had thought that, since the accompaniment to the choir was a brass quintet, we might hear one or two of this organist's motets for voices and two trombones. Instead, we were blessed with an ethereal version of his "Ave Maria," notable for the disembodied nature of the higher voices and the advanced, "Tristan"-inspired harmonies in the altos and tenors.

I have been concentrating on religious music this month and so have heard several large singing ensembles, but none has been even close to the level of professionalism of this strictly volunteer group. Conductor John Maclay should be very proud of his forces, whose blending is simply superb. The aggregate sound of the assemblage is

excellent, and individual bits of melody or harmony move about freely but accurately on a regular basis. The choir expertly combines the two most important tools in a singer's armamentarium: discipline and passion. They are amateurs in the best of all possible senses.

Highlights of this densely packed recital were an interesting contrast between the otherworldliness of the Palestrina mass "Hodie Christus natus est" ("Today Christ is born") and the rambunctiousness of the contemporaneous Sweelinck piece with the same title, conducted by associate Dylan Chan. Joy can be expressed in many forms, but each is, of necessity, extreme.

Often the most spiritual music for choir is composed by organists. Bach and Bruckner come to mind, of course, but also Franck, Messiaen, and Josef Rheinberger, Liechtenstein's only entrant in the musical pantheon. We heard two of Rheinberger's compositions, the Kyrie from Cantus Missae and Abendlied, Op. 69, No. 3. Another

dabbler in the organ loft, Felix Mendelssohn, was represented with a powerful rendition of his "Richte mich, Gott" ("Judge me, O God"), which is as earthbound and bellicose as the Palestrina was heavenly and blissful. Here the men in particular were superb.

There were also carols, including "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" and "Hark the Herald," but no need for ditties of the Jingle-bell variety that sometime cheapen these types of musicales. All the material for this presentation was carefully considered for that most high-minded of purposes, a genuine contemplation of our place in the universe. The other work by Palestrina on the program was a setting of the psalm Sicut cervus, which ends with the line, so a proposal of today's society, "While men say to me continually, Where is your God?" My humble answer is "in the music, my brother."

December 20, 2005