

Love, Hope, and Remembrance
By Craig A. Smith

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The Santa Fe Desert Chorale's 2017 season is a heady two for two, thanks to committed performances of interesting works July 27 at The Church of the Holy Faith. Titled *The Hope of Loving*, the repertoire presented works for chorus and instruments by three living composers. Two are American and one, born in England, is now a U.S. resident.

The selections were well-rehearsed -- every bit as polished as the works in the more intimate *Holy Mother* repertoire that opened July 19. The artistic contrast between the two, along with the varied repertoire in the *Liberté* and *Justice* repertoires still to come, testify that Music Director Joshua Habermann's programming skills remain of strong and true metal.

Granted, *The Hope of Loving* and *Holy Mother* are very different in sound and attitude. But then, the ability to command any number of choral periods, styles, and vocal requirements with facility has always been one of the Chorale's big strengths. That skill is certainly flourishing in this 35th anniversary year.

And it extends to Habermann: His conducting was insightful, inspired, and exceptionally competent. He not only knew the notes and commanded the right movements: He was always in the moment and never on autopilot. And he is a gracious and generous-hearted musician.

John Corigliano's (b. 1938) "Fern Hill" is a setting of Dylan Thomas's poem of the same name, first published in *Horizon* magazine in 1945. Thomas was a brilliant, hard-drinking, and fast-living Welsh poet who died at a young 39 in 1953. Originally set in 1960, Corigliano's work has undergone several revisions over the years. The Chorale performed it in a version with mezzo-soprano soloist, string ensemble, and piano.

"The Hope of Loving," by Jake Runestad (b. 1986), is scored for four-part choir, soloists, and string quartet. The composer has noted that the piece "...uses a selection of writings inspired by spiritual mystics throughout history to explore the idea of love and its manifestation in our lives." There are six sections, including one for string quartet alone.

The *Triptych* of Tarik O'Regan (b. 1978) takes in three biggish movements, "Threnody," "As We Remember Them," and "From Heaven Distilled a Clemency." The texts, taken from Christian, Islamic, and Jewish writers, succeed one another with almost bewildering rapidity throughout the piece. Originally scored for full string orchestra, it was performed here with two violins, viola, cello, and double bass.

With some history in place, how were the performances? The blend between the voices was generally well-gauged for the setting, which offers some challenges: the church is fairly long and narrow. But from my seat in the last row, I could hear perfectly well, and the sound was cohesive and usually quite attractive, especially in softer singing.

In the biggest moments -- and there were some pretty massive *fortissimi* here and there -- the sound became almost overpowering, with the men especially thundering forth with tones as strong as an iron bar. As a result, the balance of power became something of a free-for-all, with every singer for herself or himself.

Yes, it was tremendously exciting -- but I couldn't help wondering if the front rows of listeners weren't nearly toppled from the pews by sheer sonic force. Habermann is too good a musician to let that kind of thing happen of itself, so I wonder if the imbalance may have been a result of the acoustic itself and where I sat.

Given the complexities of much of the text, especially the "Fern Hill" poem, I had wondered if diction might be a problem. But the singers projected the words with clarity, and brought across the sense of the poetry and texts superbly. Even in moments where words piled up, one upon another, the sense of meaning remained generally clear. It helped that the texts in the program book were set in good-sized type in a clear layout -- a thoughtful touch from Chorale management. The program rightly recognized Kate Maroney, the fluent mezzo-soprano soloist in the Corigliano.

The instrumental ensemble, aside from the excellent pianist Nathan Salazar, were drawn from top players in the Santa Fe Symphony. They played with professional confidence, though at times I wished for more flesh on the sonic bones. Habermann also seemed to have to devote an inordinate amount of attention to them.

The Hope of Loving repeats at 4 p.m. Sunday, July 30, and 8 p.m. Thursday, August 10. The Church of the Holy Faith is at 311 E. Palace Avenue in Santa Fe. For tickets and information, visit desertchorale.org or call 505 988-2282.