

*Justice* Blog Post

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By Craig Smith

The Santa Fe Desert Chorale's *Justice* program, which premiered August 8 in Santa Fe's Christ Church, was a superb musical and cultural journey. It was devoted to music of Africa and the African-American experience, from slavery-era spirituals to music of our own time, and it included a persuasive and notable commission.

It was anything but a stiff and formal experience. Throughout, the full Chorale ensemble jubilantly moved, clapped, and even danced, all while singing with excellent sound buttressed by infectious enthusiasm. The audience was equally involved, with people nodding and often clapping along. They greeted every one of the numbers with hearty, even roaring applause. This was music that sang, swung, and rocked.

The guiding mind behind this top-flight performance was André J. Thomas, who curated, programmed, and led the repertoire. He is Director of Choral Activities and Professor of Choral Music Education at Florida State University in Tallahassee, and the author of the seminal book *Way Over in Beulah Lan': Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual*. Chorale music director Joshua Habermann deserves kudos for bringing Thomas in for this program, which also had a number of inspired community activities built around it. Thomas's oral program notes were interesting and informative; they were easier heard after intermission, when he had a microphone to use.

The first part of the concert, "Prelude to Africa," highlighted African traditional music arranged by younger composers familiar with the tradition. The Chorale sang the unaccompanied works, often in call-and-response format, with easy vocal grace and an equally fluent physical presence with lots of swaying and beckoning movement.

Part II, titled "From the Plantation," was devoted to fine concert versions of traditional spirituals, arranged by musicians intimately involved with the genre, including William Dawson, Moses Hogan, and Thomas himself. The writing often called for the group to break into many more than the usual four parts, and the effect was stunning. The third, post-intermission section, "After Emancipation," brought us more into current times and swinging works in the contemporary worship-and-praise genre.

NaGuanda Nobles displayed an impressive and operatically opulent soprano in solos including Margaret Bonds' well-known arrangement of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hand," where her voice flowered wonderfully in top notes. She was an effective collaborator with the Chorale in other spirituals, as well as contemporary religious works influenced by jazz and Gospel traditions. She used a microphone for the latter pieces, singing with a controlled abandon (the terms are not mutually exclusive) that was quite in keeping with the musical styles featured.

Brandon Boyd was the commissioned composer, and pianist for most of the pieces accompanied by instrumental ensemble. He has notable credentials, including Ph.D. and Master of Music degrees from Florida State University-Tallahassee, and a Bachelor of Music degree from Tennessee State University, Nashville.

His work *I Search* proved to be a moving and evocative piece in an accessible and very singable style, rich with jazzy harmonies and strong artistic intent. This work deserves to travel far. The poems set were written by incarcerated young people, via the "Voces de Libertad"

project of the Santa Fe County Youth Development Program. He also has been working this summer with a choir of the homeless. Besides Boyd and occasionally Thomas as pianists, the fine instrumental ensemble comprised bassist Justin Bransford and percussionist Mark Clark.

I was not familiar with Christ Church before this concert. The heart of a large complex, the sanctuary is a very good performance space -- broad, high-ceilinged, and unencumbered by pillars or anything else that might obstruct the view and the sound. The acoustics are good and not over-lively. If permitted by the church officials and family, it would be an ideal space for other musical and cultural events: There is plenty of room for performers and quite comfortable seating for an audience of just over 400. And not to be overlooked, it has ample and easy-to-access parking, a rarity for Santa Fe concert halls.

*Justice* will be heard again at 8 p.m. Saturday, August 12, at the Cathedral Church of St. John in Albuquerque, and at 4 p.m. Sunday August 13, again at Christ Church. This is not to be missed!

For ticket information or news about the Chorale's 35th season, call (505) 988-2282 or visit [desertchorale.org](http://desertchorale.org).