

A Masterful and Musically Sensitive Performance of Resistance and Revolution  
By Craig A. Smith

The Santa Fe Desert Chorale usually sounds wonderful in the soaring acoustic of Santa Fe's Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, but the August 1 performance of the *Liberté: Music of Resistance and Revolution* repertoire was something special. Music Director Joshua Habermann and the 25-voice ensemble produced nearly seamless and beautifully modulated performances of contrasting and often emotionally anguished repertoire. For this year's powerful and musically sensitive ensemble, the Basilica's great size is an advantage rather than a handicap.

The repertoire is almost all works dealing with the concept of spiritual, mental, and actual freedom attained through resistance and revolution -- aside from the opening selection, William Byrd's big 1591 "Laudibus in Sanctis." It is an expansive and often sprightly setting of a variation of Psalm 150, and it got a leaping, exulting, and fervid performance. Clearly the Chorale was on the mark and ready for action. Habermann, as throughout the whole concert, conducted with flair and confidence. The Chorale has been very lucky to have him for the past nine years, and one hopes his tenure will continue indefinitely.

Then came "Liberté" -- two notable compositions by Francis Poulenc, set to poems by the Dadaist and Surrealist Paul Éluard. These are the 1944 "Soir de Neige" (Night of Snow) and the "Liberté" movement from the large-scaled *Figure Humaine* (Human Figure) of 1943. Both were written during the Nazi occupation of part of France during World War II. They are characteristic Poulenc, often highly chromatic and filled with attractive and piquant non-traditional harmonic progressions, as well as use of the extreme ranges of the voices. The singers demonstrated full mastery of the complex intervals, ranges, and dynamics, and their French was clear and persuasive.

*Singing Revolution I* takes in works sung between 1987 and 1991 in Estonia, as protest against the long Soviet rule of the Baltic countries -- Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania-- which began in 1939. (The Soviets withdrew from all three countries in 1991). Three Estonian composers are represented, all new to me -- Cyrillus Kreek, Veljo Tormis, and Gustav Ernesaks. The next set presents works by contemporary Baltic masters Arvo Pärt (Estonian), Eriks Esenvalds, and Selga Mence (both Latvian). I don't know Baltic languages, so I can't evaluate how accurate the singers' pronunciation was in those pieces; but they were forcefully sung when called for, and tender and confiding in softer sections. The two selections in Latin, like the opening Byrd, were crisply and idiomatically sung.

*Singing in the Camps* offers heart-rending compositions, and arrangements of traditional songs, by composers who were incarcerated in German concentration camps in World War II, or were members of the active resistance: Gideon Klein, Viktor Ullmann, and Hannah Szenes. The pieces have an almost unbearable poignancy that reflects the incarcerated's hope and faith in the face of death. They were strongly sung, and I must presume the Hebrew pronunciations were faithful to the language. An additional selection, "Lift Thine Eyes" from Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, showcased an excellent female trio drawn from the full Chorale.

African-American spirituals were the fare in the closing section, *Songs of Survival II*. They were *spectacularly* sung, from the placid, reflective "Motherless Child" and the solemn "My Lord, What a Morning" to the incandescent "Walk Together Children." (The Chorale's final repertoire, *Justice*, is devoted to works of the African, African-American, and Gospel traditions; it opens August 8 at Christ Church Santa Fe.)

Two technical aspects of the performance rather disappointed me. In his oral program notes, Habermann showed a resonant and attractive speaking voice, and he was amplified just enough for his voice to carry well throughout the Basilica. He also knew his material cold. But he tended to speak too fast, so that words rushed together and were hard to make out. And I was surprised at the frequent use of a pitch pipe to give the singers their initial notes for pieces. Surely a group of this caliber can find its way from the end of one work to the start of the next without that kind of intervention.

There are two more performances of *Liberté* this season: one this Saturday, August 5 at 8 p.m. in the Cathedral of St. John, Albuquerque and one next Friday, August 11, at 8 p.m. in the Cathedral Basilica, Santa Fe. This is one you shouldn't miss.