

Greater New Bedford Choral Society invigorated under new director Jonathan Babbitt

Posted at 3:01 AM

By Keith Powers

Contributing writer

The Greater New Bedford Choral Society began a new era Sunday afternoon at First Unitarian Church, singing its first concert under Jonathan Babbitt. Babbitt takes over as music director, after the GNBCS sang for nearly half a century under the generous leadership of Gerald Dyck.

Babbitt chose sections of Bach's Christmas Oratorio to begin his tenure — the concluding Parts IV, V, and VI. Although the title may lead one to think this performance was a few weeks tardy, the oratorio was written so that its parts could be sung during the extended Christmas religious celebrations of Bach's time. Think Twelve Days of Christmas.

The sections Babbitt chose to perform commemorate the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus, the Flight into Egypt, and the Adoration of the Magi. The GNBCS singers were joined by four compelling soloists, and a robust instrumental chamber ensemble.

The expanded forces were a sign that GNBCS has been invigorated during the transition to Babbitt's leadership. More still needs to be done, but the performance was spirited, highlighted by the forceful singing of the vocal soloists and the crisp playing of the instrumentalists.

The oratorio focuses on the soloists, with the chorus coloring the narrative, and offering introductions and outros.

And the soloists took advantage. The vocalists—soprano Alexandra Whitfield, mezzo Allison Messier, tenor Gregory Zavracky, and baritone David Tinervia—were buttressed by elegant instrumental solos featuring oboe (Jane Murray), violin (Amy Rawstron Watson) and trumpet (Joe Foley), at times gracefully accompanied by their section mates. Continuo accompanist Raymond Buttero—often joined in his supporting line by cellist Daniel Harp—provided reliable rhythm underneath the melodic lines.

Babbitt's work on the podium was also impressive. His downbeat was of course constantly visible—given the number of musicians following his lead. But his attention to all details of chorus, orchestra, and soloists—both vocal and instrumental—made the performance feel like an organic piece of music-making.

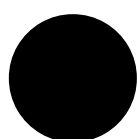
The GNBCS chorus—almost 30 strong—sang tunefully and with energy. Its ranks still need to swell; singing over almost two dozen instrumentalists proved a challenge at times, with the sonic balance between the forces being about the only true problem with the performance.

Of the impressive soloists, Zavracky had the most developed part, and took advantage. With commanding volume, and a particularly clear and hardy tone in the uppermost part of his range, he drew everyone's attention in arias like "Nun mögt ihr stolzen Feinde schrekken," and "Ich will nur dir zu Ehren."

Messier's also part was equally well realized: her recit "Wo ist der neugeborne König" was startlingly forceful. And along with Zavracky and Whitfield, she helped to bring the trio aria "Ach, wenn wird die Zeit" to life. Tinervia as well showed a powerful instrument—the four soloists were well matched, not always an easy thing to accomplish.

The orchestra was particularly impressive. South Coast music fans would recognize a few players from the ranks of the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra, and the blend and expertise added greatly to the performance. Murray had frequent and extended oboe solo accompaniments, tossing them off elegantly. The oboe duet, with desk mate Donna Marie Cobert, in "Nun mögt" was a highlight.

The GNBCS will next sing a program of American music on May 19 at 7:00 p.m., in a venue to be determined. For information and tickets visit www.gnbcs.org or call 401-869-9009.



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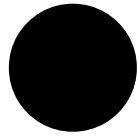
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