



Skylark captures drama behind ‘Seven Words’

By Keith Powers / Contributing writer

Posted Mar 27, 2018 at 12:11 PM

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FALMOUTH – The impressive Skylark Vocal Ensemble has been building an audience on the Cape over the past few seasons. Now it’s time for the next step: London.

Monday evening’s performance of the ensemble’s most recent recording, “Seven Words From the Cross,” took place before a generous audience in Falmouth’s First Congregational Church. It was the latest in a series of well-attended concerts by the a cappella group, which is led by Matthew Guard.

And now they fly to London, for a first-ever international touring engagement during the Holy Week festivities at St. John’s Smith Square. It’s a special event for the group, and was the motivation behind the thematic program that was recorded on Sono Luminus, and sung here lustroly Monday evening.

“Seven Words From the Cross” are not just words, but phrases – the seven utterances that Jesus made while hanging on the cross, collected from the Gospels. The phrases – “Why have you forsaken me?” and “Forgive them, they know not what they do,” among them – have become touchstones for religious observance and meditation, and have been set to music in various ways over the centuries.

Guard has created a thematic collection, using settings ranging in time from Hildegard von Bingen (12th century) to contemporary composers Anna Thorvaldsdottir and Jaakko Mäntyjärvi. The set also includes traditional works: “Amazing Grace,” and “Were You There?”

Skylark, 16 voices strong, sings with dramatic intent. This was no “the words will express what I’m feeling” program; the group emphasizes the dynamic ideas inherent in the writing.

Multiple settings by American composer William Billings (1746-1800) were included. Billings might be this country’s first composer; he has half a dozen composition books of four-part hymns, with much inventive and sophisticated writing.

“When Jesus Wept,” a unison setting, served as the opening processional, as Skylark began in the back of the church, and worked its way to the front. Close harmonies, and a startling coloratura countertenor part (the excellent Doug Dodson), highlighted Billings’s hymn “Plymton.”

Perhaps the most deeply moving setting came from another early American composer, Frederick Buckley (1833-64), whose “Break It Gently, to My Mother,” sounding much like a Civil War ballad, was sung elegantly by tenor Cory Klose.

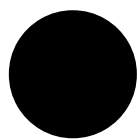
The contemporary works from Iceland (Thorvaldsdottir) and Finland (Mäntyjärvi) also stood out. Thorvaldsdottir’s “On the Holy Cross” began melismatically, with a wordless set of pitches that almost sounded like tuning up. As the voices coalesce, the lyrics (and an ancient tune) come to the fore, but then dissolve again, and the concluding “Amen” is hardly comforting.

Mäntyjärvi’s “Death May Dissolve” (actually a fantasy on a tune by Billings) is equally unsettling, with its cadence sung simultaneously in major and minor – for a brief moment sounding like Charles Ives, with his crazy-quilt of musical styles.

Hildegard von Bingen’s antiphon “Caritas Abundant” almost sounded wordless – so many musical notes are spread over each single syllable of the simple text. Alto Clare McNamara sang alone, with deep conviction, reflecting the soothing quality of the lyrics with her approach.

Each of these 16 songs had force, and were sung with deep musicality. The thematic program – tracing the various emotions of Christ on the cross, from forgiveness to distress to reunion – had a mesmerizing effect, almost like a dramatic monologue. It’s a great achievement to bring disparate voices together sonically, and Guard’s leadership was enhanced here by the cohesive quality of the program itself.

The next Skylark Vocal Ensemble concerts will be May 25 in Chatham and May 28 in Falmouth. For tickets and information, visit www.skylarkensemble.org or call 404-906-1303.



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Entertainment & Life

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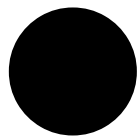
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