

**Sacramento Choral Society Performs Mendelssohn's "Choral" Symphony
by E. Haig – Sacramento Gazette, Friday, March 14, 2014**

One of the benefits of having a resident symphonic orchestra that includes a significant choral component is the number of symphonic works for choirs that can be performed. In its seventeen years as such an organization, the Sacramento Choral Society and Orchestra has provided many such performances. In sum, the breadth of symphonic works that include choral singing that have been performed by this outstanding organization is extremely impressive.

Two more such works were added to the list last Saturday, when Music Director Donald Kendrick led the 140 singers in his chorus and the 46 musicians in his orchestra in a concert at the Community Center Theater. The concert featured two symphonic works that are all too rarely heard. Both are from the Romantic tradition, although their composers were not contemporaries, and both bear a religious stamp, although in very different ways.

Charles Villiers Stanford's "Stabat Mater" uses the thirteenth century text that focuses on the mother of Jesus as she witnesses his crucifixion. The libretto, which was displayed on a screen above the stage, is not a comfortable one to read when translated from the Latin in which it was sung. The second movement, in particular, contains graphic depictions of the crucifixion that brought to mind Mel Gibson's visual treatment of the same scenes in his "Passion of the Christ."

But the music accompanying those lyrics is lushly dramatic, and it was delivered with passion by the orchestra and chorus. Adding to the majesty of the performance were the four singers who sang the solo parts of the work. Of these, soprano Marina Boudart Harris and tenor Mathew Edwardsen were most impressive. Baritone Eugene Villanueva also sang well. Only alto Malin Fritz seemed overmatched.

The work is divided into five parts, the first and third being consigned to the orchestra only. For this performance, the normal complement of 65 musicians was reduced by some 20 players. The effect was most noticeable in the strings, which occasionally lacked the necessary power the orchestration seemed to require. Otherwise, the playing was excellent throughout. And the choral singing was extraordinary, as we have come to expect with this ensemble, most especially in the last section of the work, when the grief of the earlier lyrics is replaced with the joy the mother feels, knowing she will be joined with her son one day in paradise.

Felix Mendelssohn's Second Symphony ("Lobgesang") is his version of a choral symphony, and if it wasn't modeled after Beethoven's Ninth, it was certainly a reaction to it. Mendelssohn completed it in 1840, sixteen years after Beethoven's monumental work had debuted. But if the two works are similar in form, they are exceedingly different in terms of musical substance.

In "Lobgesang" ("Hymn of Praise") Mendelssohn is moored to his conservative roots. The lyrics are entirely devoted to praise of God. Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," on the other hand, is focused on the joy of human existence, with only obligatory recognition of God's hand in creating it all. And Mendelssohn's work resonates less as a result, although, to be fair, he composed it when barely 30 years of age, while Beethoven composed his masterpiece at the age of 54. It would have been interesting to see what Mendelssohn would have developed into as a composer had he lived as long. (He died at the age of 38.)

Mendelssohn divided his symphony into ten parts. The first (consisting of three separate movements) is for the orchestra. The orchestral movements are grand examples of the young composer's enthusiasm for structure and consistency. In them, he uses the strings for much of the melody, accentuating various themes with horn and woodwinds. The movements follow a slightly varied pattern, with an opening Allegro, followed by an Allegretto that leads to an Adagio that suggests pious reflection before it closes in a more robust mood.

The choral movement is divided into nine parts, with the chorus dominant in some and the soloists in others. Here again the talents of Ms. Harris as soprano and Mr. Edwardsen as tenor were outstanding. (Soprano Carrie Hennessey joined Ms. Harris for one duet in the middle of the movement.) For its part, the chorus had one stellar moment when it sang a cappella for the opening of the lovely "Nun danket alle Gott" ("Now thank we all our God"). Under Mr. Kendrick's direction it also soared in the closing chorus, as it had at various points throughout the work.

In all, the concert was another example of how glorious choral music can be when sung by skillfully directed singers who are accompanied by a fine professional orchestra.