

SALT LAKE CHORAL ARTISTS’ ‘WHITACRE EXTRAVAGANZA’ DAZZLING

Posted on February 19, 2011 by Edward Reichel
ReichelRecommends.com

SALT LAKE CHORAL ARTISTS, “ERIC WHITACRE EXTRAVAGANZA,” Libby Gardner Concert Hall, 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Feb. 19

Eric Whitacre is a superstar among today’s choral composers. With its mass appeal, his music is performed around the globe. And this attraction is easy to understand. Whitacre’s music has a pop element to it, but it also has a serious side. His works are melodic and the parts are well written for the voices. In short it has something for everyone – audiences and singers alike.

And there is enough variety in his works to make a two-hour-long concert devoted exclusively to his music anything but boring. That was emphatically underscored by the Salt Lake Choral Artists’ concert Feb. 19. Conductor Brady Allred chose an exceptionally wonderful program that presented a wide range of Whitacre’s works and which also highlighted the technical astuteness and musical talent of the ensemble.

Taking part in the concert were the five choirs that are part of the Choral Artists (Vocal Artists, Concert Choir, Chamber Choir and Women’s Choir, as well as the Young Choral Artists). Joining them for a few of the selections were vocal ensembles from five local high schools: Alta, Bingham, East, Hillcrest and Syracuse). Allred had full control of his massive forces and used the combined choirs to good effect, especially in the last piece, in which the choirs encircled the audience in Libby Gardner Concert Hall.

As one has come to expect from Allred’s singers, the performance at the matinee concert was as close to flawless as one could imagine. Intonation and articulation were superb. The groups sang with a precision and clarity that allowed for a wonderfully broad expressive palette and lyrical phrasings. And Allred captured the minute nuances in Whitacre’s music that brought depth and dimension to the interpretations. This was a glorious afternoon of choral singing.

The concert opened with the combined choirs, minus the Vocal Artists, in three settings of poems by e.e. cummings – “i will wade out,” “hope, faith, life, love,” and “i thank You God for most this amazing day.” Allred elicited a rich sound from the singers and brought a lightness to the dense tonal clusters that made them seem to hover in the air.

This was followed by two songs for high voices, “The Seal Lullaby” and “She Weeps Over Ragoon,” sung with fluid lines and seamless phrasings by the Young Choral Artists and the Women’s Choir under the direction of Jane Fjeldsted.

The next piece, a setting of Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," was a Utah premiere. Whitacre had set the poem to music but Frost's estate refused to allow him to publish it. So he commissioned a poet to supply new words and the piece is universally known in this form, titled "Sleep." But whatever version one hears, the impact is the same – this is a stirring, ethereal setting that was sung with heartfelt sincerity by the Concert Choir.

The vibrant and dynamic "Five Hebrew Love Songs," with texts by Whitacre's wife, closed out the first half.

The second part began with one of Whitacre's most beautiful works, "Her Sacred Spirit Soars," which was sung with gorgeously crafted lines and a round, resonant sound by the Chamber Choir and the Vocal Artists.

Two other sets of songs followed, one with words by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, the other with texts by Tony Silvestri, before the last two pieces were sung.

The first of these two, "Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine," is a vivid and descriptive account of Leonardo da Vinci's attempts to build an aircraft. Whitacre mimics the style of the early Baroque in this piece, but the harmonic language and effects are unmistakably his own.

"Cloudburst," one of Whitacre's first works, ended the program. With the choirs of the Choral Artists and those of the high schools onstage and around the hall, Allred was able to effectively capture the theatrics and potency of the work. It was a fascinating way to end a wonderfully delightful concert.