

The Salt Lake Tribune

Review: Salt Lake Choral Artists' voices blend perfectly

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Memorable holiday concerts require thoughtful programming, gifted musicians and a certain indefinable spark that melds talent with the musical score in a magical way. That spark was provided by Salt Lake Choral Artists' director Brady Allred Saturday in concerts at the University of Utah's Libby Gardner Hall.

The concert's first half was organized in the format of "Nine Lessons and Carols," presented annually at King's College, Cambridge, England. But SLCA's version ended up with seven lessons and 10 carols with narrator Ron Gunnell reading the lessons, which are biblical references foretelling the birth of Jesus Christ and New Testament text describing events surrounding the birth. Despite a few slips, Gunnell proved a fine narrator, but several different voices may have created more diversity and interest — maybe even someone with a proper British accent as a nod to the original service.

The carols, sung by the organization's Women's, Concert and Chamber choirs, consisted mostly of compositions and arrangements by young New York composer Dan Forrest. His work is superb choral writing with well-considered voice leading and often a climactic punch, like his arrangement of "The First Noel." This type of music is especially welcome during the holidays, and it is easy to understand why this piece is his best-selling work — full of spine-tingling moments.

Other selections like "He is Born" and the set-ending "Carol of Joy" showed singers' crisp diction, precision and meticulously crafted phrases, an Allred trademark. The singers were accompanied by a 21-piece chamber orchestra in which nearly every member had a featured moment. Among the highlights were wind players Tiffany Sedgley, flute; Brian Crosby, clarinet; Karen Hastings, oboe; Ryan Van Liere, bassoon and Steve Park, French horn. Violinist Elizabeth Palmer, harpist Rachel Curtis and the keyboard team of pianists Laurel Hendricksen Enke and Leslie Anderson and organist Heidi Alley were also exceptional.

The concert's second half was devoted to British composer John Rutter's joyous "Magnificat." This type of liturgical work relates the Gospel of Luke's story of Mary. The conductor's wife, soprano Carol Ann Allred, sang the role of Mary in the work's only movement not sung in Latin, "Of a Rose, a Lovely Rose" — a metaphor for the mother of Jesus. She also sang in two other movements, gracing the audience with her unforced, warm tone. She had a deft ability to balance with the chorus, adding glorious descants along with moments of poignant subtlety.

The fledgling voices of the Young Choral Artists, directed by Joan Brinton and John Walker, opened the concert, and the Women's Chorus, directed by Jane Fjeldsted, sang a short but impressive set of their own, ending with Fjeldsted's own arrangement of "Soft, Soft," music perfectly suited to this group's voices.

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Salt Lake Choral Artists

R A well-conceived holiday program with perfectly blended voices.

Where • Libby Gardner Concert Hall, 1365 E. Presidents Circle, University of Utah campus, Salt Lake City

When • 2 and 7:30 p.m. Dec. 3

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