

Choral groups offer magical performance

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"TE DEUM," Salt Lake Choral Artists, Libby Gardner Concert Hall, University of Utah, Saturday

Arvo Pärt's music is finally finding a wider audience. His works have gradually been receiving more performances outside of Europe and finding the type of acceptance they deserve.

Without question, Pärt is one of the significant composers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Coming out of the intellectualism of serial music, Pärt has developed his own, highly personal, style that is difficult to categorize. Minimalist and romantic, diffuse and yet simple in structure are only a few terms that can describe his works. But its impact on audiences is unmistakable — one doesn't leave a concert of his music without being touched by the sincerity and honesty of what he writes.

The 73-year-old Estonian composer, who makes his home in Berlin, is largely unknown to Utah audiences. That's why it's so gratifying when someone here takes up the cause, as it were.

Saturday, the Salt Lake Choral Artists and the University of Utah Singers, under the baton of Brady Allred, gave what is ostensibly the local premiere of Pärt's Te Deum. A wonderfully transcendent piece, it strikes the listener immediately for its spirituality. The hypnotic effect of minimalism's repetitiveness is here joined by a mysticism that vaguely brings to mind John Taverner with one striking difference — Taverner's mysticism is ascetic; Pärt's is visceral.

The Te Deum is a captivating piece for this. It's amazing how much Pärt can say with so few musical gestures. Of course, the piece's success also lies firmly in the hands of the conductor and his musical forces. And with Allred at the helm, the Te Deum worked its magic on the audience.

Allred captured its spirituality with his perceptive and intelligent reading. His interpretation was incredibly nuanced and wonderfully expressive. He coaxed a stunningly moving and heartfelt performance out of the Salt Lake Choral Artists and the University Singers. The two groups sang with a radiance that resonated with rich timbers and textures. Their singing was polished and seamless — characteristics that one has come to expect from Allred's ensembles.

The concert opened with another Te Deum, this one by the contemporary Czech composer Petr Eben. Diametrically opposite to Pärt's setting, Eben's is much more forceful and intense, but interspersed with delicately lyrical passages. The Choral Artists gave a vibrant and dynamic performance that captured the work's pungency but also its wondrous expressiveness.

The second half was more diverse, with folk music of eastern Europe and pieces by Sergei Rachmaninoff, György Orban and Jacobus Handl, sung by the University Singers, who showed their remarkable talent in this set.

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