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May Festival off to impressive season

CONCERT REVIEW

By Janelle Gelfand

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The brass choir made a joyful noise, the May Festival Chorus sang in the ancient language of Old Church Slavonic and the floor of Music Hall vibrated with the thundering tones of the organ. It could only be Leos Janacek's "Glagolitic Mass."

The extraordinary and rarely heard Mass had its second outing ever at the Cincinnati May Festival on Saturday night. Conductor James Conlon, who also led the 1985 performance, described the 1926 work to the audience as "life-affirming."

The chorus delivered its texts powerfully, a quartet of excellent soloists captured the work's beauty and urgency, and Conlon persuasively led the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra with celebrated organist Paul Jacobs through a landscape of startling instrumental colors.

The evening's second half included Stravinsky's "Symphony of Psalms" and Dvorak's "Te Deum."

"Glagolitic Mass" has five vocal movements that relate to the Roman Catholic Ordinary of the Mass (minus the "Dona nobis pacem"). The nationalist Moravian composer sought to relate to the Czech people by using authentic Old Slavonic, rather than Latin texts. That, as well as a flamboyant interlude for organ and chorales for the brass that Conlon compared to "Gabrieli on steroids," makes it truly unique.

The May Festival Chorus, prepared by Robert Porco, sang impressively through the work's refined, bold and sometimes fierce moments. The chorus set a glowing tone in the opening "Gospodi Pomiluj" (Kyrie) and sang fervently and confidently throughout, including the dramatic centerpiece, the "Veruju" (Credo).

With the lion's share of the solos, soprano Christine Brewer was simply magnificent. Despite taxing high registers and difficult leaps, her voice remained unforced, lyrical and incandescent.

Bass Morris Robinson and Rodrick Dixon made fine contributions (unfortunately Dixon was often covered by the orchestra). The excellent mezzo-soprano Ekaterina Semenchuk had only a cameo role in her festival debut, but she returns next week.

Jacobs tackled Janacek's wildly exuberant organ solo with flair and completely from memory.

The instrumental writing included trumpet fanfares, powerful themes for the trombones and horns, tone painting for the winds and folk-like themes for the strings. Concertmaster Timothy Lees projected a sweet tone in the beguiling violin solo in the gentle "Sanctus."

Dvorak's celebratory "Te Deum" also made a stunning impression in the second half, from its ecstatic timpani

rolls in the opening (Patrick Schleker) to its joyous finale.

Two terrific soloists, soprano Kara Shay Thomson and Robinson, joined the orchestra and chorus. Thomson projected a big, glorious sound and was richly expressive in her solos. Robinson's imposing bass was an asset in "Tu Rex gloriae" (You are the King of glory).

The May Festival continues at 8 p.m. Friday in Music Hall. Tickets: 513-381-3300, www.mayfestival.com.

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