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Basilica again gracious host of May Festival

CONCERT REVIEW

By Janelle Gelfand

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The Cincinnati May Festival's annual concert in Covington's Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption is always a treat. But the serene beauty of this year's program of sacred music, directed by Robert Porco, was unusually memorable.

Porco, the festival's director of choruses since 1989, led the May Festival Chamber Choir on Sunday in a gem of a program that spanned the centuries. It was beautifully sung. But what was most interesting was the inventive way the conductor shaped his program: Pairs of ancient and traditional texts in musical settings by two different composers.

The result was a revelation that illuminated these words across the centuries, from ancient to present-day times.

Except for the concluding Bach motet, the entire program was sung a cappella, which suited the resonant acoustic of the Cathedral remarkably well.

There was the 10th-century hymn, "O Nata Lux de Lumine" (O Light Born of Light), as set by the 16th-century English Tudor composer Thomas Tallis, sometimes called "the father of English Cathedral music." Under Porco's direction, its harmonies were perfectly balanced and phrasing beautiful.

American composer Morten Lauridsen's late 20th-century view of "O Nata Lux" (from his cycle, "Lux Aeterna") followed. Its mystical mood, lush choral sound and buoyant harmonies made an inspiring contrast.

Early Renaissance composer Guillaume DuFay was represented by a setting of the Latin hymn, "Ave Maris Stella" (Hail, Star of the Sea). The chorus performed its polyphony with seamless, serene tone, and a soloist from the chorus, Justin Peter, firmly intoned the plainchant between stanzas.

How stunning, then, it was to hear a setting of the same hymn by the Norwegian romantic composer Edvard Grieg in 1893. It was warmly phrased and the choral blend was impressive, with the pure-toned sopranos floating over the top.

Porco, who has worked wonders over the years with the May Festival Chorus, shaped phrases carefully and was attentive to sonority and balance as he led his singers. They responded with radiant singing, clearly enunciating the texts while providing glowing sound.

The program unfolded without a break. It opened in the Spanish Renaissance, with a refined and reverent performance of Victoria's Marian hymn, "Ave Maria." In contrast, Porco brought out the emotional center to Rachmaninoff's setting of a hymn to the Blessed Virgin, sung in Russian.

Gabrieli's "Jubilate Deo" was majestic in this space. And Mendelssohn's 19th-century setting of Psalm 100, written for a temple in Hamburg, was a terrific discovery.

Bach's motet, "Sing Under the Lord a New Song," for double chorus and sung in German, made a vibrant finale. It was preceded by German Renaissance composer Hans Leo Hassler's setting, in Latin.

As is tradition, the concert opened with a set by the May Festival Youth Chorus, admirably led by James Bagwell. The well-trained chorus, representing 25 high schools and home schooled teens, brought spiritual beauty to music by William Byrd, Messiaen and Poulenc. But the highlight was Copland's "Zion's Walls," so wonderfully sung it made me wish for more.

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

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