

## A concert fit for the angels

**BY STEPHEN PREECE, FOR THE RECORD**

September 28, 2009

You may never see an angel in your lifetime, but if you were in the audience at First United Church in Waterloo on Sunday night, you definitely heard one.

Grandly billed as a concert featuring 500 years worth of music about angels, there were many reasons why Michaelmas — A Numinous Feast for All Angels shouldn't have worked: Wildly varying musical genres, logistical challenges, and shifting acoustics, to name a few.

But it did. An exceptional slate of first-rate singers and musicians, paired with innovative programming and daring presentation, made this Chestnut Hall Camerata presentation one of the more compelling music concerts I have heard for some time.

The evening was presented in three parts, the first entitled A Service of Readings invoked with processional bass clarinet and soprano saxophone. A wide variety of readings, music and songs ranging from the sixteenth century up to the present, focused on the more famous angels from Christian tradition — Gabriel, Raphael, Lucifer and Michael).

Spoken word segments drew from the Bible and the Qur'an, and various poets, such as Longfellow. Early music composers such as William Byrd and Richard Derrington were featured, as well as compositions from artistic director (and countertenor) Daniel Cabena.

The individual and combined vocal contributions by Cabena, Alyssa Kerfoot (soprano), Matthew Cassis (baritone), and Brandon Leis (tenor) made the music sparkle. Quartet harmonies on pieces such as Orlando Gibbons' O When Garbriel Came were superb, the voices nicely matched and blended.

What this section lacked in context and coherence, it gained back two-fold in breadth, variety, and interest.

The second part featured a superlative new work by local composer Tim Corlis, currently studying at the University of British Columbia. The work was entitled Francesca's Folly, A Morality Play in Music, (with libretto by Tara Kathleen Murphy.)

With an orchestra of ten including the distinctive Scandinavian nyckelharpa, performed skillfully by soprano lead Katherine Hill, the protagonist falls prey to Lucifer's beguiling, despite the best efforts of Raphael, and with the final redemption at the hands of Michael.

Here the timeless struggle between good and evil was eloquently advanced through sumptuous poetry and fresh-sounding music, achieving visceral emotional extremes, operatic in depth and impact. Highlights included Francesca's carnal appetites frenetically spun out through Hill's voice and a nickelharpa, a raspy sounding folk-fiddle.

Cassis' Lucifer was broad and solid in intent and vocal resonance, but also smug and crafty with his simple utterance, "The maid is fair."

God made a cameo appearance as three male voices locked in irresistible tonal crunches. Cabena's ear-splitting Raphael starting Scene Three invoked infernal wrath, and Leis' noble tenor (Michael) tendered heaven's grace, "The Lord keepeth thee as a pearl in his hand."

The music lingered well beyond the action with an exquisite musical suspension incorporating melodic lines (cello, lute, violin) in various combinations, a final major chord from the organ calling for rest. As a composer, Corlis advances from height to height, this piece well-demonstrated his remarkable combination of instinct, creativity and inspiration.

The worry with Part Three was that contemporary pop songs — Neil Young, Bruce Cockburn, and Styx — might violate the very special spirit developed thus far.

Slowly advancing from the back of the room, his trademark acoustic guitar in motion, Kevin Ramessar immediately washed away any such concern. Weaving through an inspired set of original arrangements (with angels at each turn) Ramessar kept the audience spellbound with his gentle but strong and supple voice, flawless guitar phrasings, and overall impeccable musical instincts.

If this wasn't enough, the evening's labour of love included interesting artwork of angels carefully displayed at intermission in specially-dedicated rooms, as well as a very involved website with a video trailer and elaborate background details.

A few minor issues were bothersome, including the need for a more intimate venue, a too-loud organ-voice balance at times, and the unfortunate final mismatch of Sarah McLachlan's smooth and silky Angel with Cabena's classical vibrato.

These mortal foibles easily melted away, however, buoyed up by wings and spirits from this world and beyond.

The  Record.com

---