MUSIC REVIEW

Cabrillo Chorus, SFGMC provide holiday majesty in separate concerts

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There’s something in the nature of choral music that brings seasonal warmth and a festive spirit to everyone who hears it. Two concerts featuring three of the most accomplished choral groups in the Bay Area brought holiday cheer to Santa Cruz this past weekend. On Saturday evening at Holy Cross Church the Cabrillo Symphonic Chorus performed its 32nd annual “Music for the Feast of Christmas,” under the masterful direction of Cheryl Anderson. Since she joined the Cabrillo College Music faculty almost 25 years ago, Anderson has developed an outstanding choral program and under her baton Cabrillo choruses have toured extensively, performing last year in that historic landmark for choral music, St. Mark’s, Venice, and in St. Peter’s Rome after a special invitation from the Vatican.

This year’s “Feast” focused on music by Morten Lauridsen, who will be composer in residence at Cabrillo in February. Lauridsen is one of the most renowned and respected composers of choral music today, and in 2007 he received the National Medal of Arts, “for his compositions of radiant choral works combining musical beauty, power, and spiritual depth that have thrilled audiences worldwide.” There’s a richness in his harmonies and a fluidity in his use of meter that makes his music immediately recognizable.

The seven works by Lauridsen on last weekend’s program highlighted the finesse of this choir. The Cabrillo chorus is comprised of college students and people from the community and so represents all ages. Several of the soloists of college age were performing in the imposing space of Holy Cross church, filled to capacity. Many of these works are a cappella — often a challenge for a large group of vocalists — some feature soloists, and others are accompanied by piano or small instrumental ensemble. The voices were beautifully blended both in their delicate pianissimos in “Sure on This Shining Night” and in their rousing “Veni, Sancte Spiritus” from “Lux Aeterna,” both by Lauridsen. At various points in the concert the performers left the stage to sing on all sides of the audience bringing a feeling of inclusion that was heightened by audience participation in the traditional carols.

That same antiphonal device of having the performers widely spaced was a feature of the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus and the Choral Project, in their concert at Peace United Church on Sunday. Here the two choruses performed their own selections and also combined their resources in several numbers. Addressing the highly verbal and enthusiastic audience, Timothy Seeling, director of SFGMC, commented that their concert is primarily as a fundraiser for organizations in the Santa Cruz community. PFLAG, the Queer Youth Task Force, the Santa Cruz AIDS Project and the Diversity Center all benefited from the proceeds of this concert, in which a chance to conduct the chorus was auctioned and claimed, to much applause from the cheering audience. Donors also had a chance to go on stage and sing with the chorus. This is the 13th year that this chorus has performed in the church and their show is always the liveliest Christmas concert in town.

This year, for the first time, they were joined by the Choral Project, a mixed chorus from San Jose under the direction of Daniel Hughes who also arranged two of the carols. A few traditional Christmas carols were on the program but they were outnumbered by contemporary pieces such as “Heimr Arnadair” from the movie “Frozen” and “Alleluiah, Sasa!” by Ben Allaway.

An audience favorite was “Christmas Goes Classical” by David Maddux featuring popular classical pieces set to holiday-themed lyrics — what fun! Some of the songs required dress-up from the performers while comedic skits were performed featuring singing reindeer and Santa’s merry elves but the caliber of performance did not waver in spite of the hilarity. Beautifully balanced vocal lines, great attention to diction in the tongue twisters, and the visual spectacle were all ably accompanied by Kevin Roland and Ruth Butterfield-Winter on piano. Singing with the Choral Project enabled the SFGMC to perform pieces that require female voices. Biehl’s “Ave Maria” was one of these, and it produced a serene, majestic performance utilizing the women’s voices at the rear of the church, turning Peace United into our very own St. Mark’s Basilica.