

by Richard Parsons

The former chapel of Thompson Orphanage, St. Mary's Chapel, on Third Street in Charlotte, provided an intimate setting for Carolina Pro Musica's December 11 program. It was one of the most delightful Anglo-Lutheran Lessons and Carols that I've ever attended.

Tomm Lorenzin made his twenty-first Christmas appearance as the lector of the twelve readings that prefaced twelve bits of music. All are well-known Biblical passages save for two poems by Isaac Watts and T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi." Lorenzin's reading was sure and polished. Minor improvements for next year would be for Lorenzin to use some less-glaringly 20th-century device than a ring-binder and to leave his text on the lectern instead of schlepping it back and forth for each reading.

This being a concert, prayers were dispensed with, but the religious themes of the season bound everything together nicely.

The program began with a Prelude on "Joseph est bien Marié" by Michel Corrette (1709-95), performed by the full consort: Karen Hite Jacob, harpsichord, Holly Wright Maurer, bass viol, Edward Ferrell, traverso, and Rebecca Miller Saunders, [soprano and] finger cymbals.

The first music was "Veni, veni Emanuel," largely a cappella, with the audience singing the Antiphon and Maurer plucking a drone string on her bass viol. The program could have stood another proofreading and editing, for inconsistent spellings (Emanuel/Emmanuel and St. Matthews (sic) for example).

Johann Crüger's setting of "Nun komm der Heiden Heiland" was neatly executed by soprano Saunders, Ferrell and Maurer, treble recorders, and Jacob, harpsichord. The intonation of the two equal recorders, both against each other and in ensemble, was excellent, and Saunders has a delicious voice.

The program was mostly German in origin or sympathy, and Jacob's Willard Martin single-manual brass-strung harpsichord, designed after Mersenne's illustration, provided a definitely stew-and-potatoes-and-noodles domestic sound that well complimented the bluff and straightforward German compositions. The whole evening had much more the feeling of Bach and his wife and all his children, gathered around the tile stove and making rather informal music together, than of the French court, for example.

The ensemble introduced the next audience sing-along, "Wachet Auf," by performing the first verse in German. They then led the audience in singing the same verse in English. Although St. Mary's Chapel looks like it ought to be just right for an intimate concert and sing-along, its acoustics are music's worst nightmare, for in spite of a high wooden ceiling, plaster walls, and a wooden floor, it has a reverberation time of zero. Even the extremely supportive audience was unable to make a dent in the deadness. There was no blend, no reverb, no color, no warmth -- it was very disappointing in such an otherwise dear place, handsomely restored.

Saunders's "He shall feed...Come unto me" (Handel) was beautifully sung, with nice ornamentation of the vocal line in the repeat. She was effectively accompanied by traverso, treble viol, and harpsichord.

Saunders and Ferrell sang a mode VI Magnificat completely a cappella, joined by Maurer and Jacob, also unison, for the antiphon. The decision to resist adding any kind of harmony was an excellent choice. The bare-naked plainsong line needed no assistance.

Some early French rococo music crept in with Rippert's "Joseph est bien Marié," sung by Saunders. This one piece seemed to be pitched just a tone or two higher than was really flattering to her otherwise beautiful voice. Ferrell and Maurer, traversi, had lovely tone and intonation, and were properly woody and breathy.

Crüger's "Von Himmel hoch" followed the same arrangement as the previous Crüger, with the same good results.

Bach's "In dulci jubilo" is Hausmusik at its finest; when the audience reprised it in English, Ferrell's tenor held its own in a very effective way.

Lorenzin's voice was particularly warm and friendly in his reading of the Magi being led by the star (Matthew 2) to introduce "Wie schön leuchtet," first as an instrumental trio, then sung by the audience.

After Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," Saunders sang, solo, "O nata lux de lumine," a plainsong setting, rather freely, with something of the suggestion of Arabs in the bazaar, reminding me of the universal nature of the human voice.

A soprano aria by Gottfried Stölzel, from his Christmas Cantata, was a nice follow-up to Lorenzin's reading of the "Mystery of the Incarnation" from John 1 and related well to the two Crüger cantiones.

Isaac Watts's poetry, as wonderful as it is when sung, was a weak choice to follow the First Gospel of St. John, but it was nicely redeemed by the biggest Christmas warhorse of all (short of "White Christmas"), "The First Nowell," which everyone sang lustily. With such an enthusiastic group, much good might come of printing the parts to the pieces that the audience sang.

As the 7:00 p.m. crowd went away with familiar sweet songs in their hearts, people were already arriving for the 8:30 p.m. performance of this doubly sold out Christmas treat.