

Bachfest concludes with stunning performance

By John Zeugner, Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

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As a splendid caper to Music Worcester's memorable Worcester Bachfest, Christopher Shepherd brought in his Concora, professional musicians and choristers based in Hartford, to join Worcester Chorus in presenting cantatas BWM 29, 190 and 19 Sunday evening. The blend worked magically, intoxicating the near capacity crowd at WAMSworks (the old First Congregational church) whose standing ovation was so insistent and thunderous that Shepherd finally had to beg the audience shouting "Time to go home!"

Bach's 29th cantata, "Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir," begins with an instrumental sinfonia – itself fairly rare in the Bach cantata canon – and punctuates Bach's career at crucial times in his on-going antagonistic relations with the Leipzig town and church authorities. Most memorably (John Eliot Gardiner notes) in 1749, Bach himself led the cantata with such blazing vigor as to banish the rumor that his health was so declining that the town and church fathers had sneakily begun auditions for his replacement. Shepard's approach seemed initially to lack that percussive intensity, present in some recordings and videos of that cantata's opening. But soon enough Shepard's more stately rendering proved beguiling and persuasive. The strings of Concora and the especially dazzling trumpet work of Scott McIntosh underscored the banner pinned high on the left wall extolling "sustainability," a key word. Yes, Shepard's stately pace was more than sustainable, indeed enthralling. So was the solo work of tenor Jack Anthony Pott in the opening aria "Hallehja, Stark und Macht." Pott was in bell-clear voice quite able to fill the voluminous stain-glassed space. At the end, Concora was joined by the Worcester Chorus, situated in the back balcony, so that the audience witnessing the final soaring chorus "Let there be glory, praise and honor," was buffeted from in front as well as behind by echoing cascades of sound.

Before beginning BWV 190, director Shepard walked the audience through some Bach's choral complexities likely to be submerged in his sublime aural magic. Turning to his small Concora choral sections in turn Shepard explicated the fugue structure underlining the first movement. Shepard is an ingratiating explicator, maybe the best since Leonard Bernstein at drawing his audience in. It was a terrific way to build interest and enthusiasm for Bach's music. And one hopes Shepard will continue his explanatory technique in future concerts.

BWV 190 is wildly celebratory with choral bursts buttressed by trumpet exclamations, and frequent solo or duet arias. Things reached a crescendo of sparks and conviction right from the start with mezzo-soprano Pamela Frigo Johnson, tenor Pott, and bass Edward Tyler trading praises with the chorus in full tilt. There were additional beguiling sparks in the 5th movement duet with tenor Mark Child and baritone Jermaine Woodard Jr.'s hymns to Jesus – prelude to the mammoth final joint chorus “Lass uns das Jahr volbringer – Let us complete the year” the end of which may cryptically reference Bach’s town disputes since its final words are, “put the hypocrite to shame/here and in every place.” But such an interpretation demeans this glorious music.

The final piece, BWV 191 “Gloria in excelsis Deo,” ends with a majestic five part choral trade-around with sopranos, Olivia Miller and Jennifer Lamson, mezzo-soprano Johnson, tenor Potts once more, and baritone Seven A. Fasano, challenging both choruses front and behind – a soaring sonic exploration that would turn up again in Bach’s B-minor mass, but here jacked the audience into full standing ovation. Shepard brought the Worcester Chorus down to the front so that he could run through the piece again in “19th century” style, hundred-voice declaration of God’s glory. It was a resounding celebration that listening to Bach’s music renders atheism unsustainable.



Sunday's performance commanded a standing ovation. [Matt Wright Photo]



Concora and The Worcester Chorus performed at WAMSworks on Sunday under artistic director, Christopher Shepard. [Matt Wright Photo]



Jack Anthony Pott performs a solo on Sunday at WAMSworks. [Matt Wright Photo]



Concora and The Worcester Chorus performed in the closing Bachfest concert. [Matt Wright Photo]



Alexander Patrie performs. [Matt Wright Photo]



Sunday's performance commanded a standing ovation. [Matt Wright Photo]



Louise Fauteux performs a solo Sunday at WAMSworks under the artistic direction of Christopher Shepard. [Matt Wright Photo]