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SYMPHONIC CHOIR'S VOYAGE MEMORABLE

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With 2009 winding down, images of the year's most impressive musical events roll through a reviewer's mind: "Porgy and Bess" at San Francisco Opera, the Berlin Philharmonic doing Brahms at Davies Symphony Hall, the San Jose Symphonic Choir ...

Say what?

It's true. The choir, 100 voices strong, staged a performance Saturday of Ralph Vaughan Williams' "**A Sea Symphony**" that was unforgettable: visceral, churning, reaching beyond itself. And the venue was ideal: Spacious and reverberant, the Cathedral Basilica of St. Joseph in downtown San Jose was the perfect place to experience a work that takes the journey of the soul as its subject.

Was it as good as the Berlin Philharmonic? No, but that isn't the point.

This is a volunteer choral society, 85 years old, and it was performing with the 60-piece Nova Vista Symphony, a community orchestra. Yet the personal stake felt by the musicians for this music was palpable. Put that together with a pair of top-shelf soloists (soprano Aimée Puentes, baritone Peter Tuff) and a talented conductor, Leroy G. Kromm, who obviously loves Vaughan Williams' work to death, and you had all the makings of a special event.

"Take your Dramamine," Kromm joked to the audience, before launching into the work, which sets verse from Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass." Then, lifting his baton, he unleashed the opening fanfares, followed by the chorus' first declamation: "Behold, the sea itself."

Rolling figurations moved through the strings and the music began to grow like bad weather rocking the seas; we practically needed that Dramamine.

Expressive singer

Tuff, a burnished and expressive singer, rang out with Whitman's line about "dashing spray" and "winds piping and blowing," while woodwinds piped behind him, and while Kromm bowed in time toward his 160 musicians, gesticulating, pointing to one player and then the next as their entrances arrived: You! And now you!

Professional choruses and orchestras, even the best ones, can get jaded. This performance, as must be obvious by now, mattered to the musicians, and they were playing music that mattered to Vaughan Williams, a late bloomer, who completed "A **Sea Symphony**" in 1909, the year he turned 37.

The first of the Englishman's nine symphonies, it aims, like Whitman's poetry, for transcendence. It is a true choral symphony, fully integrating chorus and orchestra, much like Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 8, the so-called "Symphony of a Thousand," which premiered in Munich in September 1910, the month before Vaughan Williams conducted the first performance of "A **Sea Symphony**" in Leeds, England.

What an impact it must have had at the Leeds Festival, with its potent blend of modal folk influences, French atmospherics (Vaughan Williams studied orchestration with Ravel in 1908), military band music, sea chanteys and more.

Inside San Jose's domed cathedral, the work's first movement ("A Song for all Seas, all Ships") built to a great sound mass, abetted by the building's reverberant acoustic and shooting out toward the audience like a wave.

Second movement

The second movement ("On the Beach at Night, Alone") began with soft groaning from the low strings. This episode was shivering, intimidating, taking on awesome subjects: "All distances of place however wide, all distances of time, all souls ..."

Kromm mopped his brow before the third movement (Scherzo: "The Waves"), which commenced with whoops of wind and wave. As the Scherzo closed, he turned to face the organ loft at the back of the church, where more singers had been hidden to augment the finale ("The Explorers"). This opened with rosy hues connoting the quiet, sustained power of sunrise. Then it eddied and ascended, not unlike Mahler, through horn declarations, a celestial march and a call to the creator: "Bathe me O God in thee."

Grand statement

There was a near hair-raising duet for the baritone and soprano, and then Puentes focused her penetrating voice on these three words: "Away O soul!" Anchor hoisted, the music began to quiet itself, moving toward a horizon point and finally vanishing, leaving the cathedral in stone silence for a good 30 seconds. The audience, before beginning its applause, was soaking it all in, this terrific performance, this grand statement by composer and poet about life's interior journey.

The San Jose Symphonic Choir next performs Dec. 7 (its 30th annual "You-Sing-It Messiah" program) at the California Theatre. On March 5 at Mission Santa Clara, it presents the world premiere of "Misa de los Inmigrantes" by the very fine Saratoga-based composer Henry Mollicone. Watch for details at www.sanjosesymphonicchoir.org.

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