

From the Boston Musical Intelligencer
In: Reviews

April 27, 2015

Building Jerusalem with Live Stones

by **Anne Davenport**

The Seraphim Singers with Kol Arev, the chamber choir of Hebrew College, gave an uplifting, highly original and deeply moving “Jerusalem, Holy, Disputed, Lamented” on Sunday at First Church in Cambridge, with remarkable world premieres coming from composers Joseph Ness and the Israeli-born Avner Dorman. As always with the Seraphim Singers, one discovered gems. The singing was as nuanced and beautiful as the selections were surprising and diverse.

Few words hold a more powerful lien on our imagination or convey more complex connotations than the name of the Holy City, Jerusalem. To Jews, it is where Passover will be kept next year. To Christians, it is where the cock crowed. Symbol of human weakness and of God’s redemptive power, Jerusalem is both precarious and everlasting. The prophet Jeremiah mourned its infidelity and wept over its destruction. Isaiah predicted that Jerusalem would be risen from its ruins and be a joy from age to age. John of Patmos in his cave beheld the New Jerusalem in a vision, paved with gold and sapphires. In the 17th century, while Donne and Racine revived Jeremiah’s lamentations, our Puritan fathers pursued the Heavenly Jerusalem by building a “City upon the hill” in the American wilderness. All at once denoting an (impossible) return and an (inaccessible) future, Jerusalem exists with special richness in the sacred music that it has inspired and continues to inspire today.

The concert started with James Woodman’s setting of the text of Isaiah 60, interpreted by the two choirs integrated into one under Jennifer Lester of Seraphim Singers. Most remarkable was the massing of voices conveying strength, unity of purpose and gratitude, interspersed with meditative solo organ passages. It was elegantly succinct, affirmative in its impact, with clear melodic contours in the soprano voices giving it a lingering aura of tenderness.

There followed two rare and captivating works from the baroque age. The Seraphim Singers and the Kol Arev were separated and set facing each other for Mikolaj Zielenski’s lush and rapturous “*Confirma hoc deus*” from the *Offertorio Totius Anni* of 1611. Led by Kol Arev’s Amy Lieberman and accompanied by the organ, the two choirs produced an emotional, exquisitely balanced polyphonic sound. The Seraphim Singers then remained alone for Manuel de Sumaya’s haunting Lamentations, dating from the first half of the 18th century. The purity of the a capella voices, the somber beauty of the shifting rhythms and the poetic power of the words (*in pulvere os suum*, one’s mouth in

the dust) made a strong impact. It felt like a gift from the Seraphim Singers to their guests of Kol Arev and it was received as such. (Cantor Joseph Ness told me after the concert that he was especially struck by this piece.)

We now came to the world premiere of Joseph Ness's powerful *From the summit of Mount Scopus*, sung by the Seraphim Singers in the original Hebrew text of Avigdor Hame'iri. At once brushed with outbursts of bright light given in the beautiful voice of soprano Rachael Luther and anchored in a distinctly manly hope by the equally impressive tenor of Paul Mattal, Ness's *Scopus* was extremely moving. Its spiritual impact was one of firmness of commitment. "Jerusalem, I shall not move from here." As a refreshing Interlude Heinrich Christensen gave a marvelous rendering of Ernest Bloch's Processional and Grave from Six Organ Preludes. Christensen gave Processional an almost brass-like luminosity, and mitigated the dramatic impact of Grave with a searching quality obtained by emphasizing the ambiguous cadences. The Bloch was singularly free of the kind of unpleasant triumphalism often associated with 20th-century sacred organ music.

Kol Arev then interpreted two works by Hugo Chaim Adler. "By the waters of Babylon" was a deeply human song about longing for a lost homeland. Based on Psalm 21, "I will lift up my eyes," opened with a lovely solo by soprano Cantor Louise Treitman. It conveyed spiritual consolation and nurtured restored trust in the face of fear and doubt. After a second organ Interlude by Bloch, we heard Volker Wargenheim's "*Surge, illuminare, Jerusalem*" sung *a capella* by the Seraphim Singers. Remarkable for its word painting (e.g. "qui ecce tenebrae") and its use of Gregorian chant passages to evoke what is passed, superseded, but not forgotten, *Surge* served as an appropriate prelude to the second world premiere, commissioned by Seraphim Singers from Avner Dorman, "The Seventy Names of Jerusalem." Seraphim Singers brought out its exciting, subtle, difficult rhythms; its charm derived from a complex surface fitfulness bordering on chaos, masterfully unified by a firm structure. The combination of deep rigor and surface exuberance was not without recollections of the Baroque, though, in effect, sounding entirely fresh and new. Dorman conveyed a timeless, resilient, polyglot and adventurous Jerusalem, holy in its human treasure.

After the audience joined the two choirs to sing the hymn "Jerusalem" by Sir Charles Hubert Perry to Blake's poem that calls for Jerusalem to be built in England ("Bring me my bow of burning gold"), the women of the two choirs joined in Naomi Shemer's "Jerusalem of Gold" (1967) with Heinrich Christensen on the piano in a nicely edgy, disjunct accompaniment. Quickened by the clarion voice of soprano Jinny Sagorin, Jerusalem was depicted as the soul's irrepressible object of desire—of love, of devotion: deserving all of our efforts and requiring all of our strength.

Yosselle Rosenblatt's "To Jerusalem, your city, return with mercy," was magnificently somber. Interpreted by the combined choirs and featuring Cantor Ness as a haunting soloist, it was a heart-wrenching plea to God to restore Jerusalem. In Christian terms, this was a *De profundis clamavi*. The proximity in feeling of this plea to the music of the Russian Orthodox Church was striking. It served to remind us that the universal aspiration for God to restore Jerusalem emerges from the universality of human suffering.

By the same token, it served as a passionate Old World foil to the concluding piece of the program, which was Aaron Copland's "Zion Walls," with its carefree, youthful spirit and its indomitable American optimism. "We'll shout and go round the walls of Zion." To Copland, we are, quite simply, the children of God's house. We belong. We inherit. We adapt. As one of the Seraphim singers told me, "There is something in the Copland that made me want to cry." "Come fathers, are you not determined to enter the walls of Zion?" By joining forces to build Jerusalem here in New England, like a new gathered Church in the Wilderness, the Seraphim Singers and Kol Arev reminded us that the Holy City has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere.

Anne Davenport is a scholar of early modern theology and philosophy. She has published books on medieval theories of infinity and Descartes. Her most recent article is on Atomism and providence in 17th-century England.

<http://www.classical-scene.com/2015/04/27/seraphim-kol-arev-jerusalem/>