

Classical Music Review

The Dirty Dozen

Chanticleer maintains the relaxed air of a choir born in a kitchen.

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Chanticleer: Who would've thought Renaissance polyphony could be so much fun?

The great choirs of centuries past came out of the *scholae* of the churches and monasteries of Europe; one of the great choirs of today was born in a San Francisco kitchen. Chanticleer, the 12-man ensemble that takes its name from Chaucer's clear-voiced rooster, began as a group of Bay Area singers who met at each others' homes to indulge their shared interest in Renaissance polyphony. Twenty years and as many recordings later, they have expanded their repertoire to take in several centuries' worth of music, both sacred and profane, and have come about as close to stardom as a choir is likely to get. Last week, courtesy of the Oregon Symphony, they brought their distinctive style to an enthusiastic audience at the Schnitz.

The opening piece, a 12-part Psalm setting by Palestrina, provided an excellent introduction to Chanticleer. At one man per part, it showcased the choir's balance and cohesion, as well as its lively pacing and bright tone; subtle diction lent a rounded edge to the clean, nicely shaped phrases. Such is the choir's approach, and it brings life and movement to the rich, compelling music that makes up the better part of Chanticleer's programs, though it can heighten the insubstantiality of less weighty fare.

Both in performance and on disc, Chanticleer's intriguing programming is highly varied, with a tendency toward the obscure. The group's discography includes, in addition to the obligatory Christmas and Gregorian chant albums, recordings ranging from the 16th century Franco-Flemish composer Antoine Brumel and works of the Mexican baroque to spirituals and the music of contemporary Chinese composer Chen Yi. Wednesday night's concert was a sampler, an eclectic tour of the choral landscape beginning in Renaissance polyphony and ending in American jazz and pop, on back roads the whole way. Even the most mainstream composer on the program, Palestrina, was represented by the unusually complex *Jubilate Deo*.

Other little-known gems on the program included settings of Psalms by the early Baroque composers Salamone Rossi and Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, the former a rare example of polyphony sung in Hebrew, and the latter an energetic work full of dazzling effects. In addition to a pair of striking madrigals by Carlo Gesualdo, both good examples of the Italian's tortured, dark and enigmatic style, were two of his sacred songs in interesting and infrequently performed versions. The

songs have come down to us incomplete--the voice parts were published separately, and two are missing; Stravinsky took them up more than three centuries after their composition, filling in the missing voices in his own idiom. The result is a fascinating hybrid, just the sort of musical marginalia that imaginative programs like Chanticleer's help to keep alive.

Inserted between Psalm settings and Gesualdo were three songs by Northern California composer Allen Shearer, and their glib weightlessness made for an odd disruption in the progress of the concert. The first, "Mushrooms"--described in the program notes as "a witty setting of a Sylvia Plath poem"--exemplified the problem with the set as a whole. "Witty" is just about the last adjective that comes to mind at the mention of Sylvia Plath, and in contrast to the measured and vaguely menacing tone of the poem, Shearer has provided a bouncy musical cartoon dressed up in exquisite yet weightless harmonic garb, like Smurfs à la Jeff Koons.

The second modern composition in the program, on the other hand, was the high point of the night.

Commissioned in part by Chanticleer, *Night Chant* is a work by composer **Brent Michael Davids**, who is, James Fenimore Cooper notwithstanding, a Mohican. The serenely simple and quietly suggestive text translates: "I have something to say to you. It's night. Let's sleep together. We're beautiful. It's right. My heart is at peace." Davids has turned it into a complex and sensual Mohican madrigal, with sounds of shakers, drums and traditional Native chant. It is punctuated in parts by syncopated rhythms reminiscent of the Kecak, the Ramayana monkey chant of Bali. Despite its aboriginal roots and exotic sounds, it is built with classical compositional techniques, and it displays a rare and wonderful convergence of cultures. An amazing piece, and beautifully performed.

Folk and popular music made up the second half of the concert, as it often does for male choirs, and to its credit Chanticleer steered clear of the vapid lineup of close-harmony renditions of Beatles and Andrew Lloyd Webber tunes for which many singers have an inexplicable and distressing liking. There were a couple of forgettable jazz pieces, a few interesting folk songs, some captivating Gospel and, for dessert, a humorous and spirited version of Irving Berlin's *Blue Skies*. Interspersed throughout the concert were comments about the pieces, delivered in the group's typically relaxed and jocular style, which is one of the most charming characteristics of Chanticleer: Even as they weave their voices impeccably through complex and demanding repertoire, the singers maintain a casual, easy air, only slightly more formal than a bunch of guys hanging out in the kitchen.

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