Music Review

Wachner finds freshness in Bach oratorio

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One has become accustomed, at about this time of year, to being accosted by the inescapable, ceaseless medley of tinkly sugar plums, thrumming drummer boys, and triple concertos, all-pervasively proclaiming life’s most concentrated commercial melee – oh, and the most sacred stretch of the calendar for most of the Western world. Seizing on that last thought, thoroughly cleansing the palate once more before the assault of saccharin, Boston University’s Marsh Chapel presented J.S. Bach’s “Christmas Oratorio” Friday night, the opening of a weekend of concerts and symposia devoted to Bach’s church music.

Marsh Chapel music director, Julian Wachner, did an enviable job governing the combined forces of The Boston Bach Ensemble, the Marsh Chapel Choir, and soloists. Incredibly, the work still suffers slightly as a mongrel of recycled pieces (as if “Messiah” isn’t). But it’s a sublime masterpiece and a great challenge, making the young Wachner’s accomplishment all the more praiseworthy.

Bach so named his work “oratorio,” although it’s presented as a cycle of six cantatas and was first performed serially, beginning with the first three days of Christmas, extending through New Year’s, and ending at Epiphany. Today it’s usually heard as an integrated whole, a practice supported by the architecture of the music itself – the famous “passion chorale” finding its way into both the first and last cantatas, the dramatic arch that finds the only chromatic key relationship square in the middle, the symmetrical key scheme that begins and ends in D Major, with high brass anchoring the three “tonic” cantatas, and cantatas 5 and 6 exacting the decisive cadential relationship.

There was much to praise at many levels in this performance. Viewed from the top, it left one with a real sense of initiation, despite this being the best known of all stories, and its conclusion after three hours was part dramatic closure, part mythic reinforcement, part benediction and part spiritual commencement.

Throughout, Wachner led a lovingly detailed, completely unperturbed, historically informed performance, devoid of the early music ticks that can intrude. Of the soloists, soprano Anne Harley was the one to watch. Her voice is sweet and clear, and when she lets it bloom naturally, it can give you shivers. Violinists Julie Andrijeski and Risa Browder were outstanding, with tenor Thomas Grogg in the aria “Ich will nur dir zu ehren leben,” as was oboist Sarah Davol in the “echo” aria, “Florest mein liebster...” Contralto Elizabeth Anker’s sustained notes in “Schlaf, mein liebster...” were lovely. Bass Max van Egmond made an incisive Herod, and tenor Robert Pitcher a compelling Evangelist.