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“King’s concert a musical feast”

Choir, under direction of Paul Halley, performs with soprano Suzie LeBlanc and narrator Neil Robertson By STEPHEN PEDERSEN - Tue. Dec 15 - 4:45 AM

Two years ago a perfect storm of energy and creativity in the person of Paul Halley took over several key musical positions in Halifax: director of music at both University of King’s College and St. George’s Anglican Church as well as university musician at the Atlantic School of Theology. The performance of Christian choral music in Halifax, especially, but by no means exclusively that of the English Anglican tradition, has leaped ahead light-years in those 24 months.

Apart from the Anglican congregation at St. George’s, and the students and faculty at King’s, where Halley’s talents are well known, the music-loving public has come to appreciate his quality through his annual A King’s Christmas: A Feast of Seasonal Song and Story, featuring the all-student King’s College Chapel Choir. For the second year in a row, music lovers packed the seats of the Cathedral Church of All Saints to hear the choir, narrator Neil Robertson, Paul Halley’s organ playing, and Suzie LeBlanc’s sweet soprano voice.

The variety and excellence of the music began right at the start with the choir advancing up the centre aisle singing a 13th century Angelus Ad Virginem a cappella with Halley’s son Nicholas leading them to their places at the front. They arranged themselves in a large U at the front, next to the ceiling-high scaffolding erected for roof repairs. The tones and open harmonies of the Angelus, sensitively arranged in 13th century style by Halley, rose with breathtaking effect into the shimmering acoustics of All Saints. Nicholas Halley conducted whenever his father played the organ, and took his place in the tenor section when Paul Halley conducted.

The program included Christmas hymns, which the audience also sang, as well as well-known carols performed only by the chapel choir in intricate arrangements by Halley. The music ranged from the 13th to the 20th centuries. Halley’s arrangements followed the English Anglican choral tradition of adding descants, soaring melodies in the higher voices ringing above the main tunes like northern lights above a winter landscape. Frequently elaborate, and full of fresh musical adventure, they ornamented not only the tune, but Halley’s own re-harmonizations, in which he invented modern harmonies on the organ in a quasi-expressionist style, flowing through, around, above and below, surrounding the tunes with new musical ambience.

Suzie LeBlanc’s solo work took us all to a new level of musical ecstasy. LeBlanc and Halley collaborated on an extraordinary arrangement of the traditional 17th century French carol, Noel Nouvelet. LeBlanc penetrates the emotional core of every word in a song. Her subtle shakes at the end of phrases, playing with the pitch before dissolving it in a pianissimo unison with the organ, created a breathless hush in the huge crowd. She returned later in the program to illuminate the higher harmonics in the choir’s singing of The Nativity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, with words by Christopher Smart, the half-mad 18th century English poet, and original music by Halley. The layers of choir, organ and soloist scintillated like threads of gold in a rich brocade tapestry.

Narrator Neil Robertson, his voice crackling like crisp snow underfoot on a frigid day, presented readings from poetry (including Thomas Hardy and Shakespeare) and scripture (the obligatory Luke 2:1-19 in the poetic King James translation), with lighter touches from Dylan Thomas’s A Child’s Christmas in Wales, and The Twelve Days of Christmas correspondence between an increasingly irritated woman and her lover, who sends her everything in the famous poem, beginning with the partridge in the pear tree.

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