

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

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Calmus Delivers

By Joyce Painter Rice

The Calmus Vocal Ensemble of Leipzig sang a stellar performance Sunday for the Rockport Chamber Music Festival at the Shalin Liu Performance Center. The a cappella quintet had arrived from Germany the day before, glad to return to Rockport and the theater-by-the-sea. Their tour continues Tuesday on Nantucket and Thursday in Madison, WI.

Your reviewer had become acquainted with Calmus through their CDs, reviews and biographies. Please refer to the *BMIInt* preview article for extensive background information about the ensemble here. Many in the audience had heard Calmus at the Rockport Festival two years ago, and they too anticipated an excellent concert. **My experience Sunday began as enjoyment of world-class ensemble singing, and broadened to include amazement at the talent and proficiencies of the individuals.**

Calmus excels in the myriad technical and artistic challenges of group singing (pitch, diction, dynamics, interpretation, rhythm, precision, etc.) and they present a successful, unique style in their pop arrangements. They have won impressive awards and have been acclaimed in many different venues. My praise for them too is effusive.

The title and theme of the concert was “Touched: Music that Stirs the Emotions”. The text topic most frequently was love and the selections were presented according to contrasts and themes rather than in chronological order. All of the singers shared in presenting verbal program notes, often including humor and wit.

First came Schütz’s motet “Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt” (1648), on the text from John 3:16 (God so loved the world). Two sustained chords begin this work, for the word “Also”, and here Calmus introduced us immediately to their stunning command of technique. We heard their uniformly produced vowel and consonants in the “ah” and the “I” followed by the “z” and concluding vowel. The volume level and phrasing of each voice was matched too. The loveliness of these two chords alone was exceptional and indicated that a concert of rarely heard skill had begun.

A group of four Bach works followed. Among these, “Alles, was odem hat, lobe den Herrn”, (Let all that have life praise the Lord) at conclusion of the motet “Singet dem Herrn”, was paced at a very fast tempo and one admired the virtuosity heard in each voice. Anja Pöche, soprano, was remarkable in her skillful handling of the high tessitura and her easy and exact high B-flat near the end. This chorus is written for SATB voices, yet the full quintet sang it. I would liked to have known but could not tell how the tenor and bass parts were distributed among the tenor, baritone and bass singers.

Bach’s “Bist du bei mir” was an arrangement in which the presentation of the melody moved from voice to voice for different phrases. The slower tempo and quiet singing here was a good path for the Ensemble’s gorgeously blended sound.

Calmus then presented three of Paul Moravec’s *Sacred Love Songs* (2012), a work they had commissioned. The second of these, “Set Me as a Seal” is in motet style and features word painting. Bass Joe Roesler’s centered and clear voice was impressively low for the words “the grave”.

Two Italian madrigals by Schütz and three Jazz Ballads, “Abendharmonie”, by Harald Banter, concluded the first half of the concert. Of interest to Boston readers is that Banter, a German jazz musician, performed Gunther Schuller’s *Twelve by Eleven*, in Stuttgart in 1956. He has written works for jazz orchestra and was awarded the Silver Medal of the German Composers’ Union. Also commissioned by Calmus, the “Abendharmonie” pieces are extended works in contrasting styles and rich harmonies, again wonderfully tuned by Calmus.

After intermission, in which nature featured a thunderstorm, Calmus continued the concert with “O Primavera”, another Italian madrigal by Schütz, also beautifully sung. Then followed songs, madrigals and pop arrangements, described as music unified by their purpose to entertain people. **Whereas the beginning half of the concert was music to hear and admire, in the second half Calmus added the element of more engagement with the audience. The beginning semi-circle formation of classical singers was changed now as the singers stepped to the front of the stage for their solo leads or all the singers directly faced the audience. Everyone had solos backed up by the ensemble and it was here that the talent and capability of each singer as a brilliant musician became apparent.**

The already excellent ensemble singing sounded even better, and in part that may have been due to the standing formation. The standing order in the first half, from stage Right, was soprano, tenor, bass, baritone, countertenor. In the second half, Sebastian Krause, Calmus’ countertenor, often stood beside the soprano; their blend and tuning was phenomenal.

The first pop song, “Shape of my Heart” by Sting, arranged by Ludwig Böhme, the Calmus’ baritone and one of the Ensemble’s founding members, closely follows Sting’s original recording and featured Böhme and Tobias Pöche, Calmus’ tenor, both in heart-felt and emotional solos and then duet lines. The instrumental accompaniment was well imitated by intricate do-dahs sung by the Pöches (soprano and tenor) and Krause, and also featured Anja’s fabulous voice on a soaring descant. In this arrangement and others, the singers even imitated a muted jazz trumpet—convincingly!

There followed a sublime rendition of “Hush No More” from Purcell’s *The Fairy-Queen*. Again Calmus was artistic and scrupulous in diction: for example, the “h” and “sh” in “Hush” carefully were enunciated by everyone, in the same way and simultaneously. The tone quality was pure and strikingly elegant.

Other highlights in the early works were Janequin’s “Le Chant des Oyseaux”, a 16th-century *tour de force* featuring bird calls and complicated individual parts that both delight and impress the audience, and the hauntingly beautiful 16th-century Spanish song “Dindirin, Dindirin.”

The three additional smooth and ebullient pop songs were favorites with the audience. “Crazy Little Thing Called Love” (the song itself written as a tribute to the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll), also arranged by Ludwig Böhme and featuring him brilliantly singing the lead, had a genuine Elvis charisma and energy. “Ain’t no Sunshine when She’s Gone”, arranged by countertenor Krause, featured Böhme and others in the lead with some fine ensemble finger snapping. “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” featured a stand-out stanza for Joe Roesler, bass, and the whistled refrain eventually involved the audience.

The program closed with Manu Chao’s “Bongo Bong”, for which countertenor Krause was both the arranger and unflappable rapper. A German folksong was the single encore. Near the end of the program, Ludwig Böhme remarked to the audience “You can tell that we love to sing.” The audience murmured their agreement, an acknowledgment of the joy and power of lifelong singing, especially as cradled in that stronghold of music, Leipzig.