

MUSIC REVIEW

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Sounds of Christmas past

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | December 19, 2005

Boston Camerata

Joel Cohen, music director

At: First Church, Congregational

Cambridge, Friday night

Of all the Boston Camerata's rotating holiday programs, "An American Christmas" may be the most unusual and appealing because it is the one that belongs to us.

To put it together, music director Joel Cohen explored several different aspects of American Christmas music from our first composer, Boston tanner William Billings, through Shaker songs, shape-note hymnals, 19th-century tune books, and folk songs, interweaving them with texts from the Old and New Testaments, arranged in a sequence of prophesy and fulfillment similar to that in Handel's "Messiah." The tunes, familiar and unfamiliar, were sometimes sung in unison, sometimes supported with homespun harmonies, sometimes a cappella and sometimes supported with a small instrumental consort of guitar, flute or recorder, violin, and cello.

The vocal consort included two sopranos, Anne Azema and Anne Harley, alto Deborah Rentz-Moore, tenor Dan Hershey, baritone Donald Wilkinson, and bass Joel Frederiksen -- all singers with individuality of timbre and style. Flutist Jesse Lepkoff led off with a solo version of "Wayfaring Stranger," and Rentz-Moore followed up with a Shaker song called "Repentance," sung with feeling and with low tones of awesome resonance. Cohen and the singers took turns delivering the spoken texts, with somewhat uneven results, but both the solo and the ensemble performances were vigorously attractive. The women made much of the strikingly dissonant harmonies in a Shaker song called "Angel of Light," for example. In keeping with the Camerata's hoedown style, the audience chimed in for "Watchman of Zion" and "Greensleeves."

Cohen paid a moving tribute to John Langstaff, founder of the Revels, who died earlier in the week; Langstaff and the Camerata traveled down different roads to explore Christmas traditions more authentic than the ubiquitous commercial ones. For that reason, Hershey's simple, straightforward delivery of "I Wonder as I Wander" became a highlight because this song has been transformed into a plastic poinsettia by the Christmas industry; Hershey made it real, offering it with roots in a living soil. ■

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