

Santa Never Heard Christmas Music Like This!

*A Byzantine Christmas
With Cappella Romana
Saturday, January 9th
St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church*

Notes by my guest, Adam Ross: *Attending a concert of music that one knows virtually nothing about is always a challenge: the ear listens, but doesn't necessarily know how to interpret and understand what it is hearing. Taking in two hours of Byzantine chant celebrating Christmas and Theophany, expertly performed by Portland's Cappella Romana and led by guest conductor and vocalist Dr. Achilleas Chaldeakis, I found myself enjoying the exotic yet plaintive sounds of the melodies sung in Greek, but at first I was left a little lost to try to make sense of the music.*

The composers ranged all the way from the thirteenth century (St. Ioannis Koukouzelis, c.1280-1360), through the eighteenth (Petros Lampadarios, c.1730-1778 and Petros Bereketis fl.1680-1715), to the twentieth (Gregorios Stathis, b.1939).

Chaldeakis sang along with six other vocalists (some of whom occasionally singing solo) and a "backup group" of four men singing a drone ("isokrates") which occasionally changed harmonics to impart new colors to the piece. The men sang austere, haunting melodies that gained power simply through their length and sober gravity. Nevertheless, as the evening went on, I started to hear patterns, differences between pieces, and settle into the musical language. At one point, Rod and I found ourselves astonished that we shared the same thought, using the same word – the music had suddenly sounded even slightly "jaunty"!

I also found that the music's very restraint – austere melodies sung in largely a narrow vocal range – had a certain power, which often became overwhelming when the choir or the music stepped out of this range. Crescendos overwhelmed the senses, and gradual changes of pitch where the melody gradually transposed upward also overtook one's ears, even if the melodies themselves maintained a certain emotional reserve. In the program notes, the group explained their work to interpret ancient texts that gave only the barest details of performance practice of chanting Byzantine liturgical music. Several ancient texts were quoted at length in an

attempt to reconstruct some measure of what this music sounded like when it was first written and performed.

The result was the chorus's expert performances, strongly felt yet not showy, sober yet approaching the sublime, indeed reflected the majesty of the church in its austere beauty. Taking in this music, I was left to consider the Byzantine-styled mosaics that adorn St. Demetrios Church – beautiful, gold representations of Jesus and the apostles, yet exalted in a way that belie their human features. The art clearly reflected the music – golden representations of Jesus and the apostles – distant, richly decorated, reflecting the divine and not a mirror of our human existence.

Rod's comments: *I share all of Adam's sentiments (above), and will add just a few of my own. I too noticed that the music, which sounded at first confusing and even a little monotonous, became more apparently varied and interesting as our ears became accustomed to the musical language. Historically, that language became the major source of our own western musical norms, but in this early eastern form was strikingly different from what our "modern" ears expect. For instance, many micro-tones, placing the pitch intentionally somewhere between the notes of our western scale, sounded at first downright wrong. Soon they became instead actually expressive of feeling behind the text.*

Another difference was the way of approaching from below the initial notes of a phrase, rather like the Italian operatic custom of a slight scoop up to a note; but here the effect was different and quite elegant. When used at the beginning of a song, it reminded me of the way a bagpiper pumps up to his drone note before piping a melody.

Another effect of these variances of pitch was a kind of freedom, giving an unusual emphasis to the text, making it ultimately more like speech. This additional directness of expression was at times both exotic and startlingly intimate.

On the one hand, this group of men, singing with an extremely masculine tone (lots of body and buzzing overtones), could be seen as a group of ascetic monks singing religious texts. Paradoxically, the passionate intensity with which they sang, combined with the exotic nature of this unfamiliar music, had at times an almost erotic feel. To ears that gradually opened to unaccustomed harmonies and pitches, it was anything but dull.

See www.cappellaromana.org for information about future appearances.
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