

Solange De Santis

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Seven Seals oratorio was considered a “politically incorrect” masterpiece

By Solange De Santis

Anyone interested in great music with a biblical theme – or just great music, period – would do well to tune into CBC Radio Two on September 5 for a broadcast of a historic performance that took place in Toronto last June of Austrian composer Franz Schmidt’s oratorio *The Book with Seven Seals*.

The concert – featuring 255 singers from four choirs, six soloists and 70 musicians – threatened to shake the pillars of venerable Massey Hall as the closing night gala of a three-week international choral festival called *The Joy of Singing - within the Noise of the World*.

Renowned Canadian tenor Ben Heppner led the soloists as St. John the Evangelist, whose end-of-the-world visions – among them a scroll, or book, with seven seals – make up the last book of the Bible, the Apocalypse or Revelations. Passages include the sight of God on a throne surrounded by seven torches, four beasts and a host of elders; the four horsemen of famine, war, death and destruction; an enormous earthquake, a shooting star colliding with Earth and the triumph of hope in Christ.

It was the Canadian premiere of a powerful work that traverses a great range of emotions and offers an intense, engaging experience to rival any of the greatest oratorios, including Handel’s *Messiah*. Written between 1935 and 1937 by a composer whose work was praised by the Nazis and who died in 1939, *Book* has suffered from the weight of history (it’s been called “a politically incorrect masterpiece”). However, history also resonates in some of its passages. Who could hear the duet (performed most movingly by tenor Benjamin Butterfield and bass Gary Relyea) called “Two Survivors,” with the words “See the pale horse ... it limps and hobbles about the endless field of corpses” and not think of Auschwitz or, closer to the present, Sept. 11, 2001?

In a brief on-stage interview before the performance, conductor Howard Dyck told CBC host Eric Friesen that he (Mr. Dyck) had heard the work 15 years ago at a music school in Vienna and both he and Mr. Heppner had been eager to bring it to Canada. They realized their ambition using four choirs – the Kitchener-Waterloo Philharmonic Choir, the Menno Singers, Consort Caritatis and the Arnold Schoenberg Choir from Austria – that together produced a giant sound that occasionally was overwhelming but more often thrilling.

Some of Mr. Schmidt’s score isn’t the most original music ever heard – there are echoes of several composers, including Bach, Wagner and Brahms – and he lets a few musical ideas go on too long. Mr. Schmidt could also have dropped the organ interludes that open parts one and two and were reminiscent of a creepy evening with the Phantom of the Opera. But for the most part, *Book* possesses a cohesive intelligence and depth of feeling.

The opening, St. John’s greeting “Grace be to you and peace,” begins on a heraldic note that seems as if the clouds are parting, followed by a clean rain. The Voice of God, sung by impressive young bass Robert Pomakov, arrives on a suitably solemn note. The prologue ends with a gorgeous chorus – “You are worthy to open the book” – that gloriously highlights the soprano voices.

Among the soloists, soprano Measha Brueggergosman and mezzo Susan Platts melded beautifully on the duet “Have pity on us mothers.” The Two Survivors duet featured tentative xylophone notes that sounded like dancing bones. After that duet, St. John’s sees “the souls of those who had been slain for God’s word” and the music creates moments of tenderness, but implies that the hard-won peace was bought with grief.

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The chorus that ends part one describes the great earthquake and it seems as if the earth is chattering at us, as if everything natural is making noise – wind, trees, rain – and time is marching toward an inexorable end over which we have no control. Part two contains St. John's longest solo, as he describes the holy Lamb breaking the seventh seal and Mr. Heppner really let his voice ring out in a passage that is gradually moving toward a hopeful vision. The second part features a shimmering "Hallelujah" chorus that is stately and moving.

Where *Book* differs from *Messiah* is that Mr. Schmidt's God is more stern and coercive. The last chorus, sung *a capella* by the male voices, refers to "Your wrath is the time to judge the dead, to reward the prophets and the saints as well as those who fear Your name." Handel's work refers more to beauty and hope in redemption in Christ. Nevertheless, making Mr. Schmidt's acquaintance is a rewarding experience.

Note: *The Book with Seven Seals* has been recorded several times, recently with the Bavarian Radio Orchestra and with the Vienna Philharmonic.

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