

AMERICAN SPIRITUAL ENSEMBLE REVIEW

An explosion of joy rocks the opera house

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by Richard Storm

The concert given at the Sarasota Opera House on Sunday by the American Spiritual Ensemble threatened to demolish the very building whose restoration was being celebrated, so explosively joyful was the music they presented.

The ensemble, made up of operatic voices from around the country, produces a sound of such sumptuous power, energy and commitment that one is hard put to find words worthy of the effect they make on an audience. On this occasion, honoring the work of Susan Danis as executive director of Sarasota Opera during the past 11 years, the singers, under the direction of Everett McCorvey and accompanied at the piano by Tedrin Blair Lindsay, presented a varied and demanding program of music that frequently left this listener and most of the audience in happy tears.

Although the chorus was founded with the mission of preserving the great tradition of the Negro Spiritual, the scope of its endeavor has expanded to include music of a wider variety while maintaining a strong focus on the spiritual. In his introduction to the program McCorvey made it clear that this is not simply the protest music of the African-American slave, but also includes the rich religious folksong tradition of that part of our national culture. It is worth noting that the 19th-century Czech composer Antonin Dvorak incorporated thematic material from this heritage in his iconic symphony, "From the New World," calling it the "real" American music.

The program offered was by no means limited to the familiar repertory. In fact, many of the compositions we heard were unfamiliar, although they were alternated with such treasures as "Oh, What a Beautiful City" and "Sit Down Servant, Sit Down." Others, such as "Is There Anybody Here" and "You Must Have That True Religion," come from a contemporary creative surge in this literature. In all of these the ensemble, and a group of superb soloists drawn from its ranks, were compelling in their spiritual and vocal power.

Holiday music, too, found a place in the eclectic procession, including "Behold the Star" and "Away in a Manger" (in a lovely contemporary setting.) "Behold the Star" was especially notable, as was a lovely arrangement of "Over the Rainbow" by Lindsay. Ending the program with an absolutely mesmerizing performance of "Circle of Life" from "The Lion King" was an astute choice, as was the earlier sing-along of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" and Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus," which gave the audience a welcome opportunity to join voices with the superb singers in the aisles — an unforgettable experience, one for which we are truly grateful in this season of giving.