

June 22, 2010

Smooth flow the strains



The Hindu

MUSIC AND MELODY: At the concert. Photo: V. Ganesan

Event 'Sacred Arias' was a wonderful showcase of church music from across the centuries

Cleona Abraham's crystalline voice heralded the beginning of 'Sacred Arias', much like the clear church bell that signalled the hour at the burnished, chandelier-lit, carnation-filled Arulnather Lutheran Church (ALC). Eleven soloists accompanied by two pianists performed some of the best pieces of church music from across the centuries, in aid of the ALC piano fund.

Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' forms the aural wallpaper for many radio stations. But, it was from his 'Gloria', with Jayanthi Prabhakar at the piano, that Cleona opened the evening with 'Domine Deus' — her voice flowing with buoyant lyrics, like a gentle march.

From Bach's 'St. Mathew Passion', Ebenezer Arunkumar sang 'Geduld' with a solemnity that underlined Bach's dark ecstasy. Ebenezer's rendition conveyed the expanse of Bach's work as he describes the Passion of Christ — the lash of the whip, the anger of the crowd, the weeping of the women of Jerusalem — finally leaving only the story and a faith. Arunkumar's rendition of the aria and Leslie David's pianism drew the comparison between the tumult and the calm very well.

Some oratorios suffer the yoke of their fame rather badly. But Handel's 'Messiah' holds up to its popularity amazingly well. The three pieces performed from it — 'Rejoice' by Hannah Elliot, 'Every Valley' by Ebenezer Arunkumar and 'I Know That My Redeemer Liveth' by Anupa Paul were delightful. The two female sopranos sang with the pure, airy and melodic strains of a boy's choir while 'Every Valley' was presented with skill and style.

This was followed by two arias by Shekinah Shawn. The first was 'Laudmaus Te' from Mozart's 'Mass in C Minor'; the second was 'Alleluia' from the composer's 'Exultate Jubilate'. Shekinah's

voice was vibrato-less, focussing instead on purity and expressiveness. Even at the lowest register, the integrity and clarity of voice and word were not sacrificed.

Two duets, both from Handel's works, offered the voices an opportunity for ornate passagework and a perfect communion. 'Go Baffled Coward Go' from 'Samson' was sung by Augustine Paul (tenor) and Billy John (bass). The second was 'O Lovely Peace' from 'Judas Maccabaeus' by Augustine Paul (tenor) and Shekinah Shawn (soprano). The voices were full-bodied, but never forced. The strong bass never over-powered, the joyful soprano and tenor soared at leaping intervals.

From Haydn's well-known 'Creation', Nadisha Thomas sang 'On Mighty Pens'. Nadisha varied the dynamics very well, first beginning with a whisper, then building to a fortissimo.

Asish Ittyerah Joseph sang 'If With All Your Hearts', a short piece rendered in a warm tenor, while Sangita Santosham sang 'Hear Ye Israel'. Both pieces were from Mendelssohn's 'Elijah' and sung in vivid voices soaring in strength and range.

It was refreshing to hear Liddle's 'Abide With Me' by Samuel Grubb. The hymn — which has been arranged to death and turned into syrupy choral pieces — was sung in a deep bass, yet lithe tempo, lending dramatic colour to the sombre mood it so often invokes.

The finale was Mozart's 'Ave Verum Corpus' by all the voices rendered without embellishments, but blended to soar and shake the proverbial rafters.

The church has excellent acoustics, and the Essex piano with its rich timbre deserves every bit of the fund. However, a clearer enunciation of the text would have made the music more sacred.