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Sound and serenity



ROUSING NOTES At Stainer's Crucifixion and other Classical Selections Photo: R. Ravindran

‘Stainer's Crucifixion and other Classical Selections’ mirrored the poignant mood of the Lenten season

The season of Lent is rarely associated with liturgical music — Christmas, with its ample store of classical melodies, enjoys that honour. But, Lenten music has its own beauty; the Passion of Christ and the people, places and events associated with it have been captured through the orchestral presentations of the great Masters.

Last weekend at the Museum Theatre, the Madras Musical Association Choir presented ‘Stainer's Crucifixion and other Classical Selections’ conducted by Augustine Paul, with Edwin Roy as the accompanist and an orchestra led by George Samuel, featuring violins, flute, viola, cello and recorders (a Baroque-era English flute).

Remarkable fluidity

The concert opened with Beethoven's ‘Pathetique Sonata’, played as an overture. Roy, the pianist, has been, over the years, a consistently-elegant player. He can, with remarkable fluidity and soft-spoken style, play quick harmonic turns as he can rollicking runs.

The performance of the orchestra, though resonant, sometimes lacked definition. Often, in a bar or two, they sounded hesitant, but their edge-of-the-seat passion in ‘Processional to Cavalry’ added much to the overall performance.

The choir launched itself full force in the second piece — Stainer's ‘The Crucifixion: A Meditation on the Sacred Passion of the Holy Redeemer’. Victorian in concept and range, it was first performed in 1887.

The choir, like the composer, drew inspiration from Bach's Passions for the theatrical structure of its singing while maintaining the serene and poignant mood of Christ's last journey.

Stainer's hymns, beginning with Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane and ending with his commending his spirit, are full of vibrant creativity, lending themselves both to choral singing and solos.

These were sung with verve by Ebenezer Arunkumar, John Bennet Victor, Revi Thomas, Binil Chelliah, Leo Gift, Arpith Siromoney, Alfred Pramod, Augustine Paul, Ravi Santosham, Diya Paul, Anupa Paul, Roshni Rajan, Shilvi Sharon and Sangita Santosham.

Arunkumar and Victor carried much of the emotional weight of the work. Passages such as 'King Ever Glorious', 'Father Forgive Them' and 'He Made Himself No Reputation' underlined the rhythm and diction of Victorian hymns.

The choir sang 'Fling Wide The Gates' and 'God So Loved The World' with rich conviction and dynamism.

The orchestra performed Mozart's 'Ave Verum', a sedate piece, with controlled harmony. The art was in the pacing of this piece — when to dramatise and when to meditate — which the orchestra excelled in.

Bach's 'Jesu Joy Of Man's Desiring' was sung rosy and sweet, but the orchestra tended to waver, with the first violins leading the pace and the second violins slowing down to a canter.

Expressive performance

Frederick Hall's plaintive cry 'Were You There?' was sung by the men's chorus. With its slow rhythm and inspiring theme, it was a powerhouse performance causing the audience to "tremble."

The women's chorus along with the viola and cello performed Harry Loes' 'The Curse Of The Cross', an expressive performance full of poignancy mirroring the anguish of the women of Jerusalem.

The choir's performance of 'Te Deum', a magnificent choral piece sung to celebrate military victories and coronations, underlined a mature Haydn.

A short piece, it rounded up the concert and, in essence, much of the message of Easter — that of glory. The concert was a fitting tribute to Lent and to the music inspired by it.

As for some of the audience who kept stomping about during the concert? Forgive them for they know not what they do.