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## **Review: May Festival Chorus, soloists radiant in Bach**

An intimate concert in Covington's Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption is a longstanding May Festival tradition that always sells out quickly. With light filtering in through its glorious stained glass windows, the cathedral is an inspiring place to hear music.

On Sunday, the May Festival performed its third concert, this one featuring sacred choral music, with J.S. Bach's Cantata No. 47 as the most substantial piece on the program. Director of choruses Robert Porco, who led his full chorus and orchestra in [a magnificent performance of Vaughan Williams' "Sea Symphony"](#) on Saturday, was on the podium the next day to lead his 45-member May Festival Chamber Choir, members of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and two superb soloists.

The concert, which also included winning performances by the May Festival Youth Chorus under James Bagwell, was serene and well-sung. I only wish there had been more contrasting music that was less somber and more joyous.

That said, Bach's cantatas are always a joy to hear. He wrote some 300 of them for Sunday services and feast days during his post at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Germany. Cantata No. 47, "Wer Sich Selbst Erhöhet" (He who exalts himself) uses biblical verses from Ephesians and Luke.

The small ensemble of strings and winds included a portative organ (Heather MacPhail). Porco took a somewhat ponderous tempo in the opening chorus, which features long, interweaving lines of counterpoint. That was perhaps a wise decision, due to the extremely reverberant cathedral acoustics, which made clarity difficult. However, it also robbed the music of momentum.

The cantata benefited from not only two outstanding soloists, but also from orchestral soloists in the obbligato parts. Displaying a bell-like soprano and excellent diction, Russian-American soprano Yulia Van Doren stepped in at the last moment for Rebecca Evans (who had to cancel). Her collaboration with violinist Kathryn Woolley in the soprano aria was a festival highlight. Woolley, a graduate of the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, played the highly ornamented violin part with virtuosity and beauty of tone.

And bass-baritone Dashon Burton made a memorable debut in the bass recitative and aria. Displaying a commanding presence, he easily handled its long, florid passages and

an expressive voice. The founding member of the Grammy-winning group, Roomful of Teeth, followed the score with his iPad.

Porco also led the chorus in two a cappella motets by Brahms: "Warum ist das Licht gegeben" (Why is light given to him who is in misery) and "Schaffe in mir" (Create in me, God, a clean heart). They were reverently sung. The first featured flowing counterpoint and exquisite dynamic range. Its ending chorale, in homage to Bach, left an impression of peaceful resignation.

The chorus expertly navigated the fugues and imitative counterpoint of the second work, which traveled from darkness to light.

To open the concert, Bagwell, a talented conductor who is also the music director of The Collegiate Chorale, led the Youth Chorus in short gems by Palestrina, Poulenc and Berlioz. The last, "O mon âme" (O my soul), the epilogue from Berlioz's "L'Enfance due Christ," impressed for the refined sound of the chorus, as well as their articulation of the French text. Tenor Brian Donaldson joined the ensemble for this radiant collaboration.

The May Festival continues on Friday and Saturday in Music Hall. Tickets and information: 513-381-3300, [www.mayfestival.com](http://www.mayfestival.com).