

A critical review of the Christmas Ecumenical choir

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By Chick Huettel

OK, here it goes. I've been requested to write a "musical review" of the Christmas Ecumenical Choir under the direction of Adele Armitage held at Christ the King Episcopal Church.

First of all, it's a miracle in itself that all the various religious affiliations can come together and then be led by one person from a particular church. But those who know Adele can only understand, simply because she is all business with music. This makes one assured the minute the first note is struck from her piano or organ that she is a born leader.

Now let's see, my credentials as a music critic are, of course, superb. (All music enamored people think their voices are heaven sent, so why shouldn't I?)

But for those who are sticklers, here is my curriculum vita. I was privately trained in voice by opera baritone Bobby Kirkham, who went on to manage the New Orleans Opera Company. I was a soloist at two large churches in Memphis, Tenn., performed in four opera productions and various classical functions, ceremonies and recitals. I still sing at the Cullman Benedictine Abbey chanting choir and played a horn instrument in a band. Plus, I'm an avid classical music fan, opera buff and lover of ballet.

So with that, here we go Adele, you asked for the review. No holds barred.

The evening of the performance was marvelous.

Crisp and cold, we were greeted by the singers themselves as we entered the church vestibule.

The performance began and I immediately noted there had been long, very long hours of practice. Why?

Because it was not the standard Christmas carols sung by every church, school and kindergarten. It was an adult evening that I appreciated.

The variations of familiar themes were soothing however, more often than not, singing discords can be dangerous to an untrained ear. Yet Adele somehow closed the gap between "new" Christmas music and the traditional.

I wanted some customary music as did the younger children at times but the choir was so well prepared and rehearsed that I could see the audience was "much pleased" (old Middle Age wordage).

The soloists were also nice but one of them somewhat lost control and went flat. (You asked me, Adele, so I'm telling you what I heard.)

Once, when I was requested to solo a Handel piece for Easter, the choir director asked me after practice if it was beyond my register (voice range).

"No, problem, I can easily manage it."

After the next few practices she again asked if I was straining at the upper notes and was uncomfortable.

"No, not to worry, Madame. I'll have it under complete command at the performance."

At Easter morning Mass I stood ready to go and prompted the choir master and organist. Then as the choir began the intro, a sci-fi vision unfolded before my eyes.

God's vengeance came upon me. A swirling cloud engulfed me and the yawning gates of hell opened and above the entrance a sign read; "Welcome to vain glory land."

I was plummeted into the inter depths of hell right at church. I suffered, sweated and fought through the entire solo piece. I distinctly remember waving for the organist to come on stronger to cover my blunders.

After the Mass, the choir director said I sang like the wailing werewolf of London coupled with howls of a denied male coyote in mating season.

I really blew it, so blame it on solo vanity.

The Ecumenical Choir instrumentation was marvelous. The horns did well, and the violins delightful (Carol Wolowsky is an extremely noted violinist that was asked to fly to Thailand and play at an opera).

Barbara Hodge who plays through an electric magic box by way of blowing on a mutant clarinet gave an oboe effect that was not quite an oboe sound but more like an medieval deep-reeded flute. That splendid sound perfectly tied the Christmas instrument ensemble together.

What must be remembered in all church chorals -- whether it be five people or 500, be it opera chorus or a monks chanting -- the absolute golden professional rule is NEVER to sing louder than the person to your right or left.

If this is not practiced then all is shouting chaos and the unforgivable sin of "off balance" makes a mess of the whole composition. One can easily listen to proper rhythm and choral harmony for hours but shouting as Mozart said, "tires one quickly and the public walk away".

This choir was evidently schooled in this most important music theory requirement.

The Ecumenical Choir under the baton of Adele has risen through the years to a professional standard. They are to be commended by the enormous effort in the diversity of the music. And from my stand point, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir "ain't got noth'n" on the singing folks from Walton County. Shan't miss it next year, and neither should you.

Mark Twain wrote, "A statue was never build to a critic," and so I close my review because I want statues of me around Walton County. Uh-oh! There goes the vanity horror again.

Fair winds to ye matey.

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