

May Festival radiant in Cathedral Basilica



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(Photo: Provided/AJ Waltz)

For the second time in the same weekend, James Conlon ended Sunday's May Festival program with an audience sing-along of the "Hallelujah Chorus." The encore is a part of festival tradition that, this year, is both celebratory and bittersweet as Conlon leads his final season as music director.

The inspiring venue for Sunday's program was the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption in Covington, where it has been held in since Conlon launched the tradition in 1980.

"They took a chance in 1980, and I believe it will remain as a tradition," Conlon told the cathedral's sold-out crowd. "Thank you to those who allowed us to share our music in this beautiful place."

Hailing Conlon's championship of new works, the festival commissioned Julia Adolphe's "Sea Dream Elegies" and Alvin Singleton's "Prayer." Both were given their world premieres on Sunday.

With light streaming through its stained glass windows, it is a stunning to place to hear music, and the smaller choral and instrumental forces add to the intimate experience. Mozart's "Regina Coeli," performed by the May Festival Youth Chorus and four soloists under its director James Bagwell, was brightly sung and made a joyful opener.

Adolphe, just 28 and a doctoral student at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music, is a gifted American composer whose artistry is turning heads around the country. For the festival, she set the poetry of Iranian-born poet Nahal Navidar. The four poems, each with evocative sea imagery, represented "the journey from love and comfort, pain and loss, to peace and acceptance," she wrote in the notes.

At once modern and archaic, Adolphe's music had a luminous beauty that warmly enveloped the listener. Scored for chorus, soprano soloist, oboe (Christopher Philpotts) and cello (Dan Culnan), it was beautifully performed. The elite May Festival Chamber Choir, prepared by Robert Porco, performed Adolphe's close harmonies with pure tones in the opening "Between Calm and Thunder," and the effect was both mystical and spiritual. The vocal music was interrupted by melodic fragments for oboe and cello, and Conlon's spacious tempo gave it a feeling of floating.



The Cathedral Basilica in Covington *(Photo: Provided/AJ Waltz)*

Adolphe's writing was particularly inventive in "A Thousand Splintered Shards," a verse with the imagery of sea glass. Her music included agitated gestures for the cellist, and a counterpoint of spoken words for the men of the chorus. A soprano soloist Jackie Stevens (a CCM student) performed the lyrical "For Whom Does Your Heart Despair," with heartfelt phrasing. The final "Dance of Moon and Sea" opened with a hymn-like setting for chorus. Here, the composer contrasted the depth of the men's voices against echo effects in the women's. It was deeply beautiful, and Adolphe was present to take a bow. She is clearly a talent to watch.

Singleton's "Prayer" was a fascinating contrast. Scored for tenor soloist, chorus, harp (Gillian Benet Sell), trumpet (Douglas Lindsay), cello (Culnan) and organ (Heather MacPhail), the composer wove spirituals into his music. But this was no mere setting of spirituals. The choir's "My Lord, What a Mornin'" was followed by colorful sections for chorus and instrumentalists that the composer said evoked "responses" in the African-American church service. He also set the words of "A Christian Prayer," and the poem's "save us" and "teach us" were recurring motifs.

Rodrick Dixon's vibrant tenor was an asset in this colorful and diverse score, and the chorus, singing with more refinement than ever this year, was excellent. The fragmented writing gave the work something of an unsettled quality, although the composer created some beautiful instrumental and choral sonorities. The audience gave it a warm reception and Singleton took a bow.

The program ended on a serene note with both choirs performing Mozart's motet, "Ave verum corpus."

The evening began with an organ prelude, beautifully played by Basilica organist Gregory Schaffer, with trumpeter Lindsay.

The May Festival continues at 8 p.m. Friday in Music Hall with Dvorak's "Stabat Mater." Pre-concert recital at 7 p.m. Tickets: 513-381-3300, mayfestival.com.

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