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Wendell Berry, simply sung

By Andrew Adler

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Pianist Harry Pickens is as much a spiritualist as he is a musician, which may explain his deep affinity for the poetry of Kentuckian Wendell Berry. Berry's verse, plainspoken and openhearted, is itself fundamentally connected to the rich earth of his native state. So when Pickens was casting about for suitable texts to set to music, some of these poems emerged as an almost inevitable match.

Yesterday, Pickens' "And All the Earth Shall Sing," choral treatments concentrating on Berry's Sabbath poems taken from a collection titled "A Timbered Choir," was given its premiere by Voces Novae, the choral ensemble for which Pickens is artist in residence. Artistic director Frank A. Heller III led a fluent, warmly sympathetic account at Christ Church Cathedral, with Pickens partnering selected portions from the piano.

One certainly could appreciate how Pickens took a poem such as "What Stood Will Stand" and spun out supple, swift and lightly pointed phrases speaking of "new perfection in new earth," or his gently angular methodology amid "You See, My Mother Said." I do wish he'd taken a few more chances with the music, tested a few more expressive limits. But that was not his strategy here.

Still, as a testament to the spiritual foundations of nature -- not to mention a warning against humankind's tendency to squander nature's myriad gifts (delivered with appropriate vehemence in "It Is the Destruction of the World") -- the settings were persuasive.

So were two interludes with readings spoken by Katie Blackerby Weible and played by Pickens. Everything about "And All the Earth Shall Sing" was honest and unfettered. That, by itself, should count as a significant achievement.

The program will be repeated tonight at 7:30 at the church, 421 S. Second St.

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Additional Facts

MUSIC REVIEW

Voces Novae
