

Review: The Pipes of Christmas
By Paul Somers, Editor
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The Celtic Heart

Even as one approached Summit's Central Presbyterian Church, the sound of Highland Pipes was in the air. Outside the door stood a contingent of pipers taking turns playing as the audience arrived. Inside, there was not a seat to be had, nor had there been for the earlier afternoon performance. The history of this area is one of settlement by Scots and Scots-Irish. In spite of transient populations which move about the nation at the whim of multi-national corporations, there are always enough folks for whom the call of the Celtic is strong and who would not miss a concert like this for anything.

Not all music was Scottish or even Celtic, but the indoor performance began in stirring fashion as Pipe Major Kevin R. Blandford and Scottish snare drummer Arthur Peters (both champions all the way from Redlands, California) marched down the aisle. At first organ then a quintet from Solid Brass joined in, so by the time Blandford and Peters were up in the chancel and facing the audience the musical experience was thrilling. Indeed, for those with Scottish connections it was emotionally overwhelming. Some folks sitting near me were already in tears, and we weren't five minutes into the concert.

It was a program filled with high points, most of them musical, but some spoken as well.

It looked on paper as if the musical star of the show would be Princeton-born Metropolitan Opera baritone Mark Delavan, who was proudly wearing his Clan Johnston tartan. But he was matched in every expressive and musical respect by Celtic fiddler Paul Woodiel. When the two performed Baloo, Lammy quite early in the evening, it was an exquisite portent.

Woodiel's playing was of the utmost technical security. During Lo, How A Rose E'er Blooming he played legato contrapuntal double stops perfectly in tune. And in the subsequent I Wonder As I Wander the final statement of the tune was in ethereally pristine flageolet harmonics.

Delavan, of course, had his great moments as well. The first half of the program ended with Amazing Grace, a hymn-tune too often piped this fall at funeral after funeral. To hear it sung so well by Delavan and with such increased emotion when the Highland pipes and snare joined in was almost too much to bear in Summit, a town which lost many, many souls on September 11. That it was preceded by the keening of the solo pipes playing Lament for the Lost only heightened the audience response.

The music was not all Scottish. There was Suo gan, the famous Welsh lullaby, all the more moving because of its simplicity. And many songs from outside the Celtic circle or even the British Isles. The composers of O Holy Night and Silent Night would have been amazed (and one hopes touched as well) to hear their music played by Uilleann pipes as well as the more expected violin and organ.

The only fully authentic instrument for Silent Night was Mr. Delavan playing a simple guitar accompaniment and leading the audience in singing. Solid Brass, based in neighboring Chatham, only enhanced its already fine reputation. The depth of sound with which they surrounded all the pieces they supported was palpable. When combined with the organ the result was uplifting, but when that combination was joined by the Highland pipes it was hair-raising.

Many of the pieces, especially those with flutist Margaret Winter and fiddler Woodiel, were supplied with modernist piano accompaniments. While purists might complain that they were not authentic, so might the same conservatives complain of Bartok's and Kodaly's folk-song settings.

But the unattributed piano accompaniments played by both Jeffrey H. Rickard and Susie Petrov were tasteful and harmonically piquant.

It wasn't all music. The concert was narrated by Susan Porterfield Currie, a woman with an incomparably persuasive and gripping voice. I for one could listen to her speak for hours at a time, and a few others with whom I spoke afterward wholeheartedly agreed.

While she was the glue holding the evening together, she was not the "hit". That distinction was left to Evan Thomson Cattanach, a Scot who tours the USA as "Brand Ambassador for The Classic Malts of Scotland."

He provided the only reading of scripture I've ever heard which received applause. He delivered the Christmas story in Scots dialect with the inflections not of a preacher but of a storyteller. The familiar Chapter 2 of Luke was for many the non-musical highlight of the evening.

Frederick C. Clark, a member of the Calvary Episcopal Church Choir in Summit, also read. After the concert he and Delavan reminisced about their days in that church's choir well before the baritone set foot on the stage of New York City Opera, to say nothing of the Met or Chicago Lyric Opera where he sings Amfortas this season.

The evening was a thrill for Scots, Celts of all sorts, and anyone else who came including a few Asians. Everyone that night was, at least for a while, an honorary member of one clan or another.