

The Salt Lake City Tribune

April 7, 2008

A cappella virtuosity fills Cathedral of the Madeleine

By Catherine Reese Newton

The Madeleine Festival of the Arts and Humanities opened its 20th season Sunday with a stunning performance by the Calmus Ensemble. The a cappella ensemble presented four centuries' worth of sacred music from Leipzig, Germany, where all five young singers received their musical training.

Calmus Ensemble members are soprano Anja Lipfert, countertenor Sebastian Krause, tenor Tobias Pöche, baritone Ludwig Böhme and bass Joe Roesler. Including a woman in the lineup is a bold move for an ensemble like this; the blend of soprano and countertenor timbres is the Calmus Ensemble's most distinguishing feature. The effect was particularly arresting when Lipfert's and Krause's vocal lines crossed, or when Krause took the higher line, as he did in Bach's "Herr, nicht schicke deine Rache (Lord, send not thy wrath)." In another Bach chorale, "Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam (Christ the Lord came to Jordan)," arranged by Böhme, the baritone! took the lead.

Music of Bach and his forerunner Heinrich Schütz dominated the first half of the program; the second half offered more stylistic variety, with works of Mendelssohn, Max Reger, and 20th-century composers Kurt Thomas and Hugo Distler. The closing selection, Distler's "Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied (Sing a new song to the Lord)," was especially thrilling, with the higher voices bursting into sonic bloom above the lower voices' chant.

The entire evening was like a clinic in precise intonation, impeccable blending and vocal beauty. As the final notes of each selection resonated in the spacious Cathedral of the Madeleine, the five singers seemed to relish the effect as much as the audience did. The Calmus Ensemble offered Reger's aptly titled "Nachtlied (Evensong)" as an encore.