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Cappella SF Revels in World Premieres

“No stranger to the Bay Area, Swedish conductor Ragnar Bohlin has been music director of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus since 2007, winning three Grammy Awards for their 2010 recording of Mahler’s Symphony No. 8, including Best Choral Performance. While some might be tempted to rest easy on these impressive laurels, Bohlin continues to push the boundaries and limits of his craft. This pursuit of excellence is evident in his founding of Cappella SF and was on full display Sunday evening at the stunningly beautiful Mission Dolores Basilica in San Francisco.

Marking its fifth season, Cappella SF certainly lived up to its billing, in the words of composer-in-residence David Conte, as the “Rolls Royce” of choruses. While its impressive balance, blend, intonation, and diction could be continually praised, the power of this performance came from a quality well beyond technique. Palpable from start to finish was an emphasis on exploring contrast, color, and variety in the way a collection of human voices is able to create sound and connect with an audience.

The concert, titled “Unveiling: New Music From Sweden And America,” was nicely balanced from top to bottom. The “bookends,” Eric Whitacre’s *When David Heard* and Jacob Mühlrad’s *Time*, were definite highlights. Both composers made powerful use of silence, particularly Whitacre in his setting of the poignant Biblical text describing David’s grief over the death of his son, Absalom.

In between, we were treated to a variety of works, including multiple world premieres. Carl Unander-Scharin’s *Djupt Under Dagens Yta*, based on hymns and poems from the Swedish theologian Olov Hartman, first painted a picture of an ecologically devastated landscape devastated. Yet the tone changed midway through, emphasizing the power of humanity and



spirituality to search for life and meaning.

The chorus shined in the premiere of Fredrik Sixten's *Seek Him*. This representation of the search for meaning (and God) felt fresh and vibrant, with imagery reminiscent of a Tim Burton movie. Sixten made use of extensive leaps and complex tonalities, all handled with elegance and grace. Meanwhile, there was a sustained lyricism, swelling to an incredibly effective crescendo that seemed to grow organically from within the chorus. In particular, the sopranos shimmered above a rich foundation laid below them, while the basses provided extraordinary depth and presence when necessary, without overwhelming the group's emphasis on a solid tenor/mezzo range. The intonation throughout this difficult piece was impeccable.

After intermission, David Conte's newly completed *Madrigals for the Seasons* provided a refreshing change of pace. Each movement had a distinct flavor, as the composer shared his inspiration of recreating the seasonal changes of his native Ohio with a California audience. In "Summer," we got subtle hints of Gershwin. The chorus again displayed incredible diction in "Autumn," with John Clare's text emerging with remarkable clarity, despite overlapping and layered dialogue. Bohlin's conducting skill was displayed in "Winter," where he elicited shimmering vibrato from the singers when necessary with his left hand, while maintaining extreme rhythmic accuracy with the right. Finally, "Spring" broke through, with the addition of piano and a lively, energetic setting of William Blake's lighthearted text.

Composer Jacob Mühlrad's multi-language *Time* is a challenge for SF Cappella None of the pieces could have followed Jacob Mühlrad's *Time*, which Bohlin described accurately as "symphonic" in nature. The emphasis on color and sophistication of harmony were truly remarkable, especially from such a young composer. The texture varied from thick and rich to light and ethereal. The word "time" is used in 27 different languages throughout the piece, and Mühlrad forces us to acknowledge their differences by alternately highlighting hard and soft consonants throughout.

Overall, this performance was a celebration of great progress in the art form of choral



performance. In this genre, there is absolutely no substitute for live performance, and the Bay Area is extremely fortunate to have Cappella SF providing us all the rare opportunity to experience it at such an exceptionally high level.”

June 6, 2008

“Bohlin proceeded to lead Poulenc’s masterpiece entirely from memory and with enormous passion and conviction. The San Francisco Symphony Chorus was in rare form, performing with excellent diction, a wide range of tone color, and exquisite balance.”

May 16, 2009

“The Symphony Chorus, led by director Ragnar Bohlin, invested Handel’s great outbursts with a wealth of tonal color to go with the nationalist fervor.”

May, 2009

“A consistently reliable ensemble as it is, the San Francisco Symphony Chorus surprised and delighted tonight with the best performance I have ever heard from it. This was a thrilling performance. What has Ragnar Bohlin wrought? A chorus of a single voice, singing with one breath, the pianissimos clearly audible, fortissimos not overdone, everything effortless and ‘musical,’ diction and projection exceptional. It was one of those rare and wonderful performances when you register a portion of the Mass on top of a musical Richter scale (by excellence, not volume), and then the next part tops it, and this incredible crescendo keeps going and going to the last note.”

November, 2009



“Exquisite chorus. The chorus’ very opening outburst was nearly everything that Bach can be, crisscrossing voices brilliantly delineated, the music emerging clean and vigorous with its flow and counter-flow, its celestial gears in sync, the chorus and orchestra merging as a single breathing body. Since his appointment in 2007, Bohlin has been molding this chorus, testing and perfecting its proportions to make them pour forth in a heady blend. And if there was a star of Friday’s show, it was the chorus itself. Nothing was over-sung or underdone; the group’s singing was felicitous, lit up from the inside, organized according to some musical golden mean.”

February 25, 2010

“The Swedish Radio Choir is made up of 32 instruments and their owners play them with the color and flexibility of a chamber orchestra. The Swedish choristers led by guest conductor Ragnar Bohlin made this clear from the very first notes heard on their concert. The Swedish Radio Choir is one of the finest a capella choirs in the world. Bohlin, who studied with Ericson in Sweden and is now chorus director of the San Francisco Symphony, was a vibrant leader, precise and keenly expressive. The Cathedral’s generous (reverberant) acoustics played some havoc with Bach’s motet ‘Singet dem Herrn,’ but the choir made a glorious sound and Bohlin terraced the dynamics skillfully. The choir’s sound was so full and rich it might have been heard in Kentucky, and there was a wealth of color and expressive detail.

February 24, 2010

“In their terrific concert Tuesday night at the suitably grand Fourth Presbyterian Church downtown, the a cappella ensemble offered a wide-ranging program under guest conductor Ragnar Bohlin. Bohlin lavished the grateful audience with two lighthearted encores.”



December 18, 2010

“A solid and often alluring account of this holiday standard. Ragnar Bohlin led – fastidious and appealingly attentive to detail. Bohlin’s tempos tended toward the deliberate, with one or two exceptions. That paid off in the oratorio’s most reflective passages – “Behold the Lamb of God” sounded especially fine.”

February 15, 2011

“This *Lacrimosa* (1994), masterfully directed by Ragnar Bohlin, clearly pointed ahead to the Mozart. Becoming more “vocal” as it progressed, it gave new life to the key of D minor.”

February 24, 2011

“Last night’s program began with a setting of the ‘*Lacrimosa*’ text from the requiem mass by the Lithuanian composer Mindaugas Urbaitis completed in 1994. This work was scored for eight-part a cappella chorus; and its overall logic is one of a gradual accumulation of fragments, all of which are based on the diatonic qualities of plainchant. Ragnar Bolin conducted this portion of the program, and it was clear that both he and his ensemble had internalized a sense of the overall progression of this music. The initial fragments were introduced in such a way as to arrest the listener’s attention, after which that attention was capably guided, first through the gradual buildup of those textural clouds and then through the dispersal of those clouds to reveal a familiar source. This was the first San Francisco Symphony performance of this revelatory effort, and one can only hope that more will follow in coming seasons.”

February 24, 2011



“The program began with Ragnar Bohlin leading 50 or so singers in a performance of ‘Lacrimosa’ by Ukrainian composer Mindaugas Urbaitis. The music’s permeating stillness, redolent of Eastern Orthodoxy, was leading toward the program’s next piece. In fact, Urbaitis’s voices — Bohlin seemed to pull long streamers of sound through one another — finally coalesced in the very words and melody of the Lacrimosa portion of Mozart’s Mass.”

February 24, 2011

“The evening opened with Urbaitis’s Lacrimosa, a gorgeously ruminative, a cappella effusion that, makes much of modest materials, and concludes with a statement of Mozart’s Lacrimosa motif. The chorus, under the sage leadership of Ragnar Bohlin, made one eager to hear more from the Lithuanian composer.”

March 16, 2011

“Ragnar Bohlin arrived from Sweden only four years ago, and he has already brought the organization to new heights. The triple-crown concert last month — Mozart Requiem, Urbaitis’ Lacrimosa, and Feldman’s Rothko Chapel — was just the most recent example of affecting excellence. This week, Bohlin and the Chorus are meeting their ultimate challenge in performing Bach’s B minor Mass. The result is a delightful surprise. Using minimal forces, Bohlin presides over an intimate, gentle, and lyrical performance of this majestic expression of yearning for peace and the good of all humanity. Choral balances and dynamics were superb. With everything understated, the few big forte passages of the Mass were all the more effective; especially the triumphant, joyful sound greeting the Resurrection, and the delight in the Hosanna”

December 25, 2011



“This year’s concert turned out to be the best party in town and the place was packed. Among the performing guests were sixteen brightly-voiced members of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, led by its multi-diverse director, Ragnar Bohlin. The traditional and popular numbers were highlighted by the outstanding choral arrangements of Bohlin. Recognized as one of the best symphony choruses in the world, Bohlin’s leadership garnered the 2010 Grammy for Best Choral Performance in the company’s multiple award-winning recording of Mahler’s Symphony No. 8. For this yuletide gathering, his version of ‘Go Tell It on the Mountain’ allowed even a chamber-size ensemble to fill the loftiness of the great hall and deliver a highly charged and refreshing take on the traditional Gospel favorite.”

January 13, 2012

“Directed by Ragnar Bohlin, the chorus shined throughout this taxing performance; the male chorus was especially well balanced and firmly blended.”

February 21, 2010

"Conducting the Swedish Radio Choir on tour: "I’m telling you, the members of the Swedish Radio Choir are the Olympians of choral singing, and if every choral singer got a chance to hear them, the world might hum with gorgeous music for an awfully long time. The balances among the 32 voices in the choir are unimaginably perfect; ditto the phrasing, the purity of their sound, and last, but hardly least, their unerring intonation. This was Ann Arbor’s first chance to hear the Swedish Radio Choir in an cappella concert, and on the occasion they were led by the expressive and graceful guest conductor Ragnar Bohlin, who has worked frequently with the choir in the past. The program was as fascinating and ear-opening as the singing was good. “



November 6, 2011

“The full Malmo concert house met the captivating work with cheers. It was well-deserved appreciation. Ragnar Bohlin, a son of Lund’s music life, transplanted to California, now a prophet in his father- and mother-land, was the conductor. He has conducted the piece in the New World, he masters it, he was victorious in the power of his over-arching authority and his sparse but engaged conducting. I listened with a mixture of awe and admiration. The sight of the 100-person large chorus was overwhelming. It brought a transparent, clear sound with great presence. The four choirs reached impeccable homogeneity, and Bohlin was able to play dynamically on this instrument.”

December 20, 2013

“Bohlin sized both vocal and instrumental forces to allow all of Handel’s contrapuntal intricacies to surface with crystal clarity. He achieved this affect through well-paced tempo selections and nuanced control of the dynamics. The SFS Chorus was in top form with an interpretation that could not have been fresher.”

July 3, 2012

“What the audience heard – and rewarded with a justified standing ovation – was an assured, majestic performance by MTT and the orchestra, and something even beyond that by Ragnar Bohlin’s Symphony Chorus. Besides the power required for the ‘Ode to Joy,’ a great choral performance must also be seamlessly unified and yet with distinguishable layers of tonal beauty, and that was the case here. In addition to the accustomed excellence from the women, the men also shone this time, particularly baritones and basses (not usually singled out, but starring tonight).

Bohlin himself conducted the chorus in the evening-opening Ligeti’s a capella ‘Lux aeterna,’



one of the composer's best-known works, thanks to 2001: A Space Odyssey. A fiendishly difficult work of 'voice clouds' and 'sonic fog,' 'Lux aeterna' lasts nine minutes, but feels as if time stopped. That is especially true at the end: after the concluding five bars the sound disappears and the score calls for seven bars of conducting in silence. The audience was mesmerized watching Bohlin conduct and no sound from the chorus."

March 17, 2011

"Bohlin conducted with a love of every twist and turn in Bach's inventive capacity. The result was a performance both stimulating and informative for contemporary audiences that never fell short in honoring the overflowing inventiveness that Bach could summon."

March 17, 2011

"The most striking thing about Wednesday's often potent account of Bach's B-Minor Mass was the mastery with which conductor Ragnar Bohlin managed the surge and flow of the work's weightiest sections. It was a virtuoso display of musical hydrodynamics. There were other rewarding aspects to the performance. But Bohlin shone most impressively when wrangling Bach's dense contrapuntal textures into fluid, eloquent shape. The chorus responded with alacrity to Bohlin's leadership, and the orchestra sounded superb throughout."

May 23, 2008

"He had particular, fine assistance from the chorus, which seems to be flowering under the leadership of its new director, Ragnar Bohlin."



May 9, 2011

“The real vocal star was Ragnar Bohlin’s magnificent Symphony Chorus, singing with glorious vitality and precision.”

May 7, 2011

“The heroes of the evening were the members of Ragnar Bohlin’s Symphony Chorus which sang with power, transparency, and a marvelous responsiveness to the text.”

May 19, 2011

“The hands-down, on-your-feet stars were members of Ragnar Bohlin’s San Francisco Symphony Chorus.”

May 10, 2011

Headline: “The Thrill of a Great Choral Performance” “Ragnar Bohlin’s San Francisco Symphony Chorus provided a blessing for Davies Symphony Hall audiences last weekend in performances of Mahler’s Symphony No. 2, establishing the highest standard against which all future performances will be evaluated. It’s impossible to put in words the thrill of 132 singers “speaking” with one voice, a voice coming from far and yet as if from deep inside the listener. It was not a matter of spirituality, religiosity, hope-against-hope defiance of death, but an expression of ultimate humanity, an exaltation of music. A performance exceeding the SFS’s own previous accomplishments, something from the same domain where true greatness dwells, the preparation for the concluding sonic orgy Leonard Bernstein had put his stamp on. Is this excessive praise for the SFS Chorus? Don’t take my word for it. Ask anybody from the audiences. Listen to former choral conductor Robert Commanday: ‘The chorus



entrance was the most sensitive single moment of the performance, as Mahler intended, and the singing continued to be beautifully balanced and spiritual.' Or The Wall Street Journal critic David Littlejohn's unrestrained characterization of the chorus as 'sublime, best I've heard it, micromillitone control.' These are famous choruses – Czech Philharmonic Choir Brno, Choeur de Radio France and Gulbenkian Choir – but can they equal our people, the San Francisco Giants of choral World Series? Not likely."

May 24, 2011

"The happening was one of the most viscerally thrilling choral performances in my experience. I have become a fanatical fan of Bohlin and the Symphony Chorus, but even from that self-admitted position of prior bias, I didn't expect the transporting experience of this concert."

June 24, 2011

"The San Francisco Symphony Chorus is among the finest vocal ensembles in the country. Scrupulously prepared by director Ragnar Bohlin, the 142-member chorus brought daunting power to the heaven-storming climaxes, handled MTT's bracing tempo for the 'Gloria' with aplomb and sang with rapt sensitivity in the moments of spiritual repose."

June 24, 2011

"Summarizing the night's greatest strength: the chorus, directed by Ragnar Bohlin, stood out — lushly colored and passionate throughout, its sound gorgeously pouring through the strings in the opening 'Kyrie'."



June 25, 2011

“The final offering of the 2010-11 season had its moments of splendor and emotional radiance – most, if not all, courtesy of the Symphony Chorus, which gave a first-rate performance under director Ragnar Bohlin.”

October 19, 2013

“The chorus must sing with hushed reverence in the Requiem Aeternam, roar in the Dies Irae, and dance lightly through the rapid, fugal Sanctus. This the Symphony Chorus did, and more, with glorious sound that was miraculously both transparent and massive; all this, and with exceptional diction as well. All hail the superb preparation by Ragnar Bohlin.”

October 21, 2011

“In addition to Conlon, the evening’s heroes were the members of Ragnar Bohlin’s Symphony Chorus, who sang with gusto and an exquisitely calibrated dynamic range. That opening was almost translucent in its still-breathed sense of wonder, and the explosive passages of the ‘Dies Irae’ thundered magnificently.”

November 18, 2011

“The chorus (prepared by Ragnar Bohlin) blended and glowed with subtlety and conviction throughout the performance, though there were instances when the sopranos could have used additional fullness and punch. The orchestra, which played with such warm precision, managed to muddy the finale’s final chords; well, life isn’t perfect, either.”



November 17, 2011

“Ragnar Bohlin’s Symphony Chorus, singing with impeccable breath control and command of dynamics, began the piece in near-silence, letting Brahms’ harmonies seep into the hall in a disembodied pianissimo. The ensuing music unfolded in a series of sumptuous swells and falls, as if the entire chorus and orchestra were a single breathing organism; at moments of utter stillness, it sounded as though the whole world caught its breath. There were still other delights to come – a thunderous but clear-toned account of ‘Denn alles Fleisch,’ a generously lyrical rendition of ‘Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen.’”

January 14, 2012

“The Chorus, led by Ragnar Bohlin, sounded superb.”

April 7, 2012

“Ragnar Bohlin’s Symphony Chorus made a robust and technically assured contribution.”

May 11, 2013

“The 120-member chorus, singing like a ball of fire, with stamina and finesse.”

May 11, 2013

“Missa Solemnis rests on the shoulders of the chorus, and Bohlin’s ensemble sounded magnificent throughout the evening. His singers were exemplary.”



May 12, 2013

“The results were tremendous – poised, dynamic, and cohesive, Ragnar Bohlin’s 120-member chorus singing with pristine tone.”

Nov. 28, 2013

“Besides almost uniform excellence in performance, Semyon Bychkov’s direction of an orchestra at it’s best, Ragnar Bohlin’s brilliant SFS Chorus gave an utterly moving War Requiem without a smidgen of sentimentality. That’s an exceptional accomplishment.”

Nov. 30, 2013

“Ragnar Bohlin’s Symphony Chorus sang superbly throughout – in the radiant ‘Pie Jesu Domine,’ in the brawny outbursts of the ‘Libera me,’ and in the breathtaking conclusion.”

April 28, 2007

“The San Francisco Symphony Chorus sounded crisp and bright or murmur-sweet, boisterous then refined. Its new director, Ragnar Bohlin, is doing something right; his singers breezed through their continual role changes, from peasants to drinkers, spirits or will-o’-the-wisps. It was an excellent performance.”