

Washington Classical Review

Bell opens new Washington Chorus era with white-knuckle Walton

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Christopher Bell conducted the Washington Chorus Wednesday night at the Kennedy Center.

The Washington Chorus opened its first season under new artistic director Christopher Bell Wednesday, and a new edge and urgency pervaded the Kennedy Center Concert Hall.

Bell, who divides his time between posts in Scotland and the Grant Park Music Festival in Chicago, was [selected last year](#) to replace the departing Julian Wachner.

We are not yet even in the actual year of the Bernstein centenary, and Bernstein fatigue has begun to set in. Bell opened his tenure with the American composer's *Chichester Psalms*, commissioned for a choir festival at Chichester Cathedral in 1965. While he has not had much time to imprint a distinctive mark on the ensemble's sound yet, Bell led an exuberant rendition of this piece in a mixture of styles. A crisply articulated introduction gave way to a Bernstein's multimeteric dance in Psalm 100, with Bell showing judicious care in regulating the volume of the orchestra, including the raucous percussion, to keep the sound balanced.

Aidan Stanton-Brand, an 11-year-old treble with training from the Children's Chorus of Washington and other ensembles, was outstanding in the central solo part of Psalm 23. Singing from memory and without amplification, he produced a quiet but steady tone that captured all the fragility and innocence of the young psalmist, often accompanied only by the two harps. He seemed not a bit shaken even by the loud, angry interjections of the male choir on Psalm 2.

Bell paced the orchestral interludes of the third movement with insistent, almost impatient drive, stamping his foot loudly at times on the podium to move things along. The choir, a large group that can sometimes get bogged down in its own volume, had to keep moving, too, even in the gentle, sighing music of the last movement. The blend of the voices, standing in sections with the women on the outside edges, was warm and even in the unaccompanied coda.

The least remarkable piece on the program was *Mid-Winter Songs*, a 1983 cycle of choral settings by American composer Morten Lauridsen, set to poetry by Robert Graves. As in much of Lauridsen's music the style of choral writing was almost exclusively homophonic, which became dull through its lack of variety. "Like Snow," with its shifts of downbeat, was effortful, with the percussion not always lining up with the ensemble, and the repetition of the same idea at the cycle's end felt trite.

Bell described this program as "the U.K. meets the U.S.," and following through with that metaphor, the Brit definitely outshone the Yanks as Bell led a manic, white-knuckle performance of William Walton's gorgeous cantata *Belshazzar's Feast*. First performed at the Leeds Festival in 1931, the piece remains as fresh and innovative today as it was then, mixing dissonance, tonality, and even jazz more deftly and originally than even Bernstein. The Washington Chorus had not performed the work [since 2006, under Robert Shafer](#).

Some intonation woes plagued the opening section, with the male chorus trending slightly flat in their unaccompanied opening, an uneasiness that the blaring saxophone did not exactly mollify. Baritone Igor Vieira was idiomatic and entertaining in the narrator's role, but the voice, shallow in tone, paled and narrowed just when it needed to bloom. By the time of the orgiastic feast scene, though, all pistons were firing with precision and wild abandon as the chorus took over the music, as if staging a coup.

From the moment the organ pealed out with the brass, marking the drinking of the wine from the sacred vessels, this performance came unhinged in the best possible way. The two brass choirs,

fitted out with all the optional instruments the score indicates, joined apocalyptically from the balconies on either side of the stage, and the music for the mysterious moment when the king sees the proverbial writing on the wall was aptly enigmatic in the metallic sheen of Walton's writing.

With a unified, blood-curdling shout ("Slain!") the choir noted the demise of Belshazzar and launched into the wild rumpus of the piece's conclusion, jangling with every conceivable percussive sound. With Bell driving the pulse ahead at a thrilling pace, the performers drew the maximum sense of drama from the exulting of the Hebrews. This was a joyful noise indeed.

The Washington Chorus performs its annual Candlelight Christmas program, December 10 to 22. thewashingtonchorus.org