

LETTER TO THE AUDIENCE

From the concert program of Benjamin Britten's 'Saint Nicolas', performed by The King's Chorus and Capella Regalis Men & Boys Choir, December 6, 2013

Dear Friends,

This performance of Britten's Saint Nicolas is a miracle. I know that all performances of great music have a miraculous quality to them, but this one feels especially so (I'll explain later). And such a feeling is suitable – I'm beginning to think it's the only way of putting this piece across – after all, in 4th century Greece, Saint Nicolas was called Nikolaos the Wonderworker. The man's life was replete with miraculous behavior, so his commemoration really ought to be as well.

Putting together a concert like this is never a simple matter to begin with – there's the beautiful piano to be found (thank you Doctor Piano), the various percussion instruments (thank you Nate Beeler), the appropriate space with the appropriate pipe organ (this beautiful Basilica, with which Halifax is blessed), and the key players. When was the last time you got to see our concertmaster, David Greenberg, playing "modern" music? David was mysteriously and irrevocably drawn in by the prospect of playing the typically superb *Bach Nun Komm der Heiden Heiland* that he found himself suckered into leading the Britten as well – and I suspect he might fall in love with that, too. My dear friend Richard Baughman managed to schedule his visit from California to coincide with this concert – he's running the percussion section. And the miracle for which I am intensely grateful is that even with the embarrassment of riches happening in this city tonight concert-wise, we still have for our performance a band of fabulous musicians playing this fabulous music.

But I will not pretend this has been easy. That would be unfair to you, dear audience member – you deserve a little background...

It was on Tuesday of this week (that's right, December 3) that things really started to get interesting. For anyone who has been rehearsing this piece, it would have been impossible not to think of the sea-storm in Nicolas's "Journey to Palestine" on Tuesday. Halifax was tempest-tossed and as I made my way through its sodden streets, trying to track down a replacement string player for one who had to back out of this concert at the last minute, I received a call from our meant-to-be Saint Nicolas, the Englishman in New York named James Kennerley. He told me in horrified tones that his lawyer forbade his travelling to Canada, due to one piece of paper that hadn't arrived yet from the infamous U.S. Immigration Service. This was a shock for James – and one for me too, I must admit. He was to travel up the next day, in order to be here in time for the dress rehearsal. A flurry of activity ensued over the course of the next four hours in the music office at the University of King's College, as choral services continued in the Chapel next door. So, thanks to our manager (Vanessa Halley – no relation of course), we had by midnight secured another great string player and an outrageously brilliant tenor.

Mark Bleeke (your "Saint Nicolas" this evening) is no stranger to Halifax. He performed here as the Evangelist in Bach's St Matthew Passion with the King's Chapel Choir three years ago. He fell in love with Halifax and Halifax loved him back and, winking her eyes and fluttering her eyelashes, she promised he'd return. And so he did. I am exceedingly grateful that Mark accepted the call of the north when it came. He shines as Saint Nicolas.

And finally the greatest miracle of all: YOU accepted the call too and here you are, to hear sounds and stories of mystery, wonder, and three pickled boys. I hope that together we can pay proper tribute to this wonderworker on his feast day, and this magician of music on his centenary, singing, "God moves in a mysterious way". He does indeed.

Nick Halley