Arts & Humanities

Speech of Angels

By
Thomas Vinciguerra ’85CC, ’86JRN, ’90GSAS
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Philippe Lechien

St. Paul’s Chapel is known for its ninety-one-foot dome, its stained-glass windows (Paul preaching in front of the Parthenon), its clay-tile ceiling, its bronze chandelier, its Ernest M. Skinner pipe organ. But when it comes to promoting its fine acoustics on a music-loving campus that includes Miller Theatre, St. Paul’s has to whisper a little louder.

On a summer day around noon, over the full-throttle whir of two large electric fans, the sounds of a string-and-piano dance suite by Columbia College senior Solomon Hoffman wafted up to the chapel's vaulted reaches.

Chris Ruenes '13CC then pursued, sometimes insistently, a spiky guitar theme of his own devising, backed by percussionist Rebecca Gray '13BC. The premiere of "Mycroft's Mirror," by Columbia College senior David Su, then filled the chamber with the haunting, atonal, and ultimately strident sound of violins, percussion, and guitar.

The fifty-odd members of the audience, some waving paper fans, also heard Barnard junior Sophie Lewis, accompanied by Hoffman, sing "Die Nacht," by Richard Strauss, and "Après un rêve," by Gabriel Fauré.

Since 1999, the Music at St. Paul's Chapel series has offered performances by students, alumni, members of the larger University community, and even those with no formal Columbia ties. University chaplain Jewelnel Davis created the series to promote "sacred music in a nonreligious setting" — "sacred" in the sense of being an expression of the performers' spirit.

"Any chaplain in the United States knows that spirituality needs to be understood in a big-tent way," she says in her office in Earl Hall. "One way is through the performing arts, whether it's music or dance." (Davis plays the piano but recalls, laughing, "When I think of growing up in churches, I was never able to get in the choir because I was tone-deaf. They told me, 'You can clap your hands, you can sway, but you can't sing!'")

The artists who appear once a week during the academic year (and once a month during the summer) are recruited through e-mail blasts and word of mouth. Last spring, Music at St. Paul's highlighted a viola, harp, and contralto ensemble called the Beowulf Consort; a Korean Christian group playing classical works called C&SC New York; and University organist Timothy Smith. This fall's menu includes the Harlem Chamber players, the Columbia University Bach Society, and chamber music by Juilliard students.

No matter their genres or styles, the artists love the space. Composer Hoffman, who conducts the Columbia Classical Performers and co-wrote the music and lyrics for the 2012 Varsity Show, much prefers St. Paul's to venues like Lerner Hall. "The other sites are not as pretty and acoustically satisfying," he says. He was especially glad

to have the world premiere of his ambitious, meandering “FADE” at St. Paul’s. “I think the way it echoed in the chapel really helped bring out some of the effects.”

Soprano Lisa Daehlin ’12TC performs all over the city with her pianist, Richard Pearson Thomas. Her first appearance at the chapel was last fall. “When I came to St. Paul’s, I thought it would be this echoey and reverb-y thing and that my voice would be lost,” she says. “But all my friends said they could hear me just fine. It’s an amazing space. It’s what I imagine a rider feels when riding a thoroughbred.”

Daehlin’s outing this summer, which featured show tunes, came with an unusual acoustical bonus. It was a hot day, so the doors and windows were open. “I was listening to the audio recording the other day, and I could hear the birds singing. I thought, ‘No way.’ They particularly liked the Jerome Kern.”

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