

Heart of the Music

Written by Dan Prosen



In the twisted, labyrinthine backstage of the Kimmel Center, Valentin Radu, Romanian-born conductor, founder and creative guiding light of Vox Ama Deus, has shocked his ensemble of musicians and vocalists.

He is fully dressed and ready to go almost half an hour before the performance begins.

Radu tells me this is part of his New Year's resolution to "be more efficient" – a resolution that he admits is not likely to be kept. In his case, fully dressed consists of full white tie, black tails, and old, worn black cowboy boots. While I am speaking with him, his manner and expressions jump from energetic to somber and brooding. But when

asked about his musical influences and background, pure joy suffuses the Maestro's face – a sincere passion that is as engaging as it is contagious.

When Radu first started his study of the piano as a child, he "detested anything earlier than Mozart," thinking it "too cerebral – not fun". He admits that at the time, he was too young to appreciate the "hidden majesty of Bach" and other baroque contemporaries. Then, as a young teen, Radu became the assistant pipe organist at the cathedral of St. Joseph in Bucharest, where he was first came into contact with religious music, which at that time in Romania was discouraged outside of the church. Says Radu, "I was humbled by Bach and Mozart," whom he now considers his two musical mentors. Up until this point in our conversation, he has been very serious – even broody. But at this juncture, I begin to see the ebullience that has become a hallmark of his conducting style. The first real smile of the evening lights up his face, he leans forward as he warms to his topic, and the intensity of his passion and joy in the music begins to shine through.

Radu, who received his bachelor's of Fine Arts at the Bucharest Academy of Music and both his master's of music and Doctorate from Juilliard, is interested in more than performing the music he loves. He is, at heart, an educator. "I like very much to perform, but also to teach," he says. "The lack of knowledge in this country on the topic of Baroque music and period instruments made it my mission to inform the public". Unlike many masters of classical music, he is not dismissive of other styles, and has founded the jazz ensembles Sound 2000 in his home country of Romania and Philly Jazz locally. He especially wishes to introduce people to the world of classical at an early age. As a music student in Bucharest, he was part of an orchestral ensemble made up of young musicians. Radu realized one of his fondest dreams in 2007 with the establishment of Camerata Ama Deus at Bryn Mar College; a chamber orchestra designed to educate as well as entertain the students of that school. Despite his appreciation for other forms of music, Radu's youth educational effort has an ulterior motive – as he puts it, "To get them out of the world of rap – the most awful music ever".

Nowhere does this whole-hearted enthusiasm become more evident than during a performance of Vox Ama Deus. Specializing exclusively in the vocal and instrumental music of the Classical and Baroque periods, Vox Ama Deus has been garnering the attention of classical music aficionados since their founding in 1991 for the Mozart Bicentennial (in fact, the name, which roughly translates as "Voice of God's Love" is also a play on Mozart's first name).

Inna Lobanova-Heasley, who not only performs as an alto in the chorus but has also made the promotion of the group her mission, says, "Every conductor is crazy in his own way. [Radu] may be crazy, but he's not boring!" And his particular brand of lunacy translates into unmitigated, unchecked passion for his art. Radu firmly believes, "music is the expression of the soul," and that it "should leave you changed". Judging by the dedication of the members of Vox Ama Deus, this is exactly what has happened to them – and what happens to their audience at every performance.

The first thing that strikes you when the chorus begins to sing is the tightness of the harmonies and the unity of the overall sound – which is simply glorious. This cohesive sound is a credit to Radu's passionate enthusiasm – an enthusiasm that has won the hearts of his performers. A certain amount of turnover is expected within any group of performers. But with Vox Ama Deus, the rate of departure is low – many of them have been performing together for years. Says Lobanova-Heasley, "When we are on stage, we are one – a blended array of singers [and musicians] who are there for the love of music".

Vox Ama Deus performs music from the Classical and Baroque periods, featuring the works of Bach, Handel, Hayden, Vivaldi and, of course, Mozart. Radu speaks of "performance practices" – the "spaces between the written notes" where the interpretation of the conductor and performers makes itself known. His focus is on performing as closely as possible to the original intent of the composers – even utilizing authentic period instruments, such as Renaissance and Baroque guitars, harpsichords, tympanis and gut-strung violins, all played with virtuosity. The instruments blend seamlessly with each other and the vocals to create a masterful musical mélange.

For many chorale ensembles, foreign language pieces are memorized phonetically and simply parroted back. The singers of Vox Ama Deus have every word translated for them, so that they understand the literal meaning of the work that they are performing. The orchestra is a delight, and the vocalists, consisting of contract professionals and trained volunteers, are a genuine pleasure. Watching their faces and hearing the fervor in their voices inspires an appreciation that goes beyond their unity and discipline. One can almost see the passion and joy radiating out from Radu, being accepted and amplified by the performers and washing over the audience.

The sight of Valentin Radu conducting a performance of Vox Ama Deus is something to experience. He begins serenely, almost lazily – one hand often in his pocket, the other waving the baton. But as the performance proceeds, his animation grows. Utilizing facial expressions and his body more than his baton, Radu seems to physically grasp the music and cascade it over the audience.

It's a rare experience to be able to share that kind of connection between performers and audience, wrought by a passion that only can come from the heart. And in this case, the heart of Vox Ama Deus heart is the appropriately named Valentin Radu.

To learn more or to view upcoming performance schedules, visit www.voxamadeus.org.

Dan Prosen lives in Philadelphia, where he only sings Classic Rock in the shower.