

Greenwich Choral Performs Intricate Christmas Program

BY LINDA PHILLIPS

The boundless energy, passion and scholarship of gifted conductor Paul F. Mueller were on full display in the Greenwich Choral Society's annual Christmas program last weekend at Christ Church.

His choice of soloists like glamorous mezzo-soprano Holly Sorensen, soaring soprano Mary Ellen Callahan and tenor Antonio Abate, the program's own Pavarotti, brought a special flair to the seasonal music, abetted by Mueller's choice of Z. Randall Hoopes' "Fanfare and Hodie."

Embracing not only historical sacred and secular music, the conductor chose this year to add readings from world literature, "Christmas Readings and Roundelays," mixing Longfellow, Emily Dickinson, Ben Jonson and Heinrich Heine (of Schumann's incomparable "Dich Ter Liebe"), with Psalms and Peter the Venerable.

Then there was the music. There is nothing as magical as the candle-bearing choir moving into the church ringing handbells. Mr. Mueller conducted from the center aisle, and the gentle "Sweetly The Bells Are Ringing," followed by Stamford Mayor Dannel Malloy's reading of "Christmas Bells" by Longfellow, set a hushed mood in the church.

Mounting the risers, male voices began the anthem "Salvation is Created," with female sections joining the somber, profound statement repeating Alleluias.

This 124-voice choir was soft and subtly shaded, as the first part of the program required, rose to exuberance and operatic heights in the "Hodie," then closed with the West Indian Christmas Carol, "The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy."

One of the two major works of the concert was the "Lauda per la Natività del Signore" (Laud to the Nativity), a cantata for the three soloists, chorus and chamber ensemble (woodwinds and piano), and the only choral work of Ottorino Respighi.

Sung in the Italian, it opened with a celestial aria by the Angel, exquisitely sung by Callahan, then moved to a passage for tenors, baritones and basses, as the Shepherd, sung by Abate, showed his robust tenor voice.

Mr. Abate, embedded in the center of the tenors well behind the instruments, had some slight pitch problems.

As Mary, Sorensen was both beautiful to see and hear as she sang of her love for the baby.

Just as the conductor kept his performers on their toes with changing styles, the audience was requested to rise and sing portions of the traditional carols strewn throughout the program.

"Our Journey Has Advanced" by Emily Dickinson and read by state Rep. Livvy R. Floren, R-149, led to a ringing audience participation of "Angels We Have Heard on High," with a majestic orchestral close.

"Silent Night," with soloists and choir as accompaniment, was sung in a terrific, complex arrangement by Michael McGlynn. i

Benjamin Britten's enormously popular "Ceremony of Carols," sung in Latin, Middle and Old English, is a masterful composition, well rendered by the choir. Young harp soloist Ashley Jackson showed prodigious technique on the instrument.

The woodwind orchestra beefed up for a brass attack in Stroope's bombastic "Fanfare and Hodie," an exultant piece worthy of a film

epic. The concert closed with traditional carols, including "The First Nowell" and "Mary Had a Little Baby Boy."