

Greenwich Choral Society join with jazz orchestra for jumpin' good time

By Jeffrey Johnson, Correspondent

"Have you heard," asked the woman sitting next to me as I sat down, "the Ryan Keberle Jazz Orchestra before?" "No," I replied, "what are they like?" "The place will be jumpin'," she said with a smile.

This program was a fund-raiser for the Greenwich Choral Society called "A Gershwin Valentine," and it took place in the Norwalk Concert Hall at 4 p.m. (March 14).

Powered by the 11-piece Ryan Keberle Jazz Orchestra, comprised of outstanding and innovative young jazz players from New York City, the event also prominently featured Edward Pleasant as a vocal soloist.

Pleasant is familiar to local audiences from his work with both the Norwalk and the Greenwich symphonies.

The Greenwich Choral Society joined and interacted with the ensemble and the soloists in a format that was refreshing and quite enjoyable on Valentine's Day.

The musical premise of the event was based on music by Gershwin, along with special love songs to form an aural Valentine bouquet.

The event opened with Keberle leading the jazz ensemble in a 1950s arrangement of "Rhapsody in Blue," by Billy Strayhorn, followed by the Don Gibson arrangement of "I Can't Stop Loving You." The ensemble quickly showed its specialty – slipping harmonies with great attention given to the way in which dynamics can shift in an ensemble of saxophones and brass.

Pleasant joined the ensemble as soloist for "Fly Me to the Moon" and "Embraceable You." Pleasant could barely contain his joy as he turned in to watch the ensemble during the breaks between verses.

The Greenwich Choral Society got its first turn in "S'Wonderful," which they performed with jazz pianist Isaac Ben Ayala.

The high point of the first half of the program was the Frank West arrangement of "Airmail Special," which was performed as hot and fiery as the music was clever and inventive.

The first half closed with the chorus and the ensemble performing "It Don't Mean a Thing."

The second half picked up where the first half left off, with an old Cab Calloway version of "Cupid's Nightmare." Keberle played a very engaging lead trombone in an arrangement of "Summertime," supported by flutes, clarinets, and muted trumpets.

The group of chamber singers from the Greenwich Choral Society performed a warm and pretty version of "Love Walked In," by Gershwin.

Pleasant rejoined the ensemble for "They Can't Take That Away from Me," "Blue Moon," and "Route 66," a song which many of the seniors in the audience were quietly singing in a voice that sounded like the world's most endearing GPS.

“Moonlight Serenade” was next for chorus and orchestra, then “Someone to Watch Over Me,” “Do it Again,” and “Shiny Stockings,” played by the ensemble with a sound one could easily get lost inside of.

As a finale, Pleasant, the jazz orchestra, and the Greenwich Choral Society performed two tunes from Porgy & Bess, “Ain’t Necessarily So” and “Lord, I’m On My Way.”

This was an entertaining event from the Greenwich Choral Society, which is an ensemble that is never predictable, and an ensemble that is always looking for new and elaborate forms of musical interaction. And the place was jumpin’.