

Greenwich Choral Society performs a Rainbow Requiem

Jeffrey Johnson for The Advocate

Stamford, May 23—The Greenwich Choral Society, led by their Music Director and Conductor Paul F. Mueller, took on the Verdi Requiem to close their 2009-2010 season at the Palace Theater.

In a note about the performance the Choral Society drew attention to the idea that there were singers from “every conceivable background—from the conservatory-trained professional to the lifelong avocational singer to a first year college student who only this fall may have learned the name of Giuseppe Verdi.”

A significant number of singers from the Hunter College Choir joined the Greenwich Choral Society for this performance. One imagines that they benefited in countless ways from this version of a vocal apprenticeship.

This mixture of ages was a welcome part of the impression as the audience looked at the huge mass of singers assembled onstage. There were also a significant number of the orchestral musicians who were young professionals also, which gave the performance a tangible sense of discovery and newness that was attractive.

Verdi's Requiem is a complex work capable of assuming many different personalities in live performance. Mueller brought out the narrative qualities of the work, making the experience feel more religious than operatic. His presence was focusing and efficient and often created a careful and orderly feel in the music.

When one remembers the Verdi Requiem it is often the loud and dramatic passages that come to mind. But the work explores more gradations of quiet music than it explores gradations of loudness. During the first half of this performance Mueller and the Greenwich Choral Society produced startlingly quiet passages that made the contrasting loud music feel vibrant and colorful as a rainbow.

The chorus is also to be commended for the clarity of its scalar runs and accuracy of the twisting and difficult vocal parts woven throughout this work. The “Sanctus” fugue was an example where their efforts produced a rhythmically vibrant celebration.

The soloists were most effective as individuals rather than in the ensembles, where balances were frequently skewed. Mezzo-soprano Ann McMahon Quintero made the deepest impression. From her “Liber scriptus” solo through her gorgeous singing in the “Lux Aeterna” Quintero proved to be intelligent and spontaneous; able to react to each context and ensemble. Her voice was rounded and rich across registers.

Bass soloist Kevin Deas brought authoritative presence to his part and communicated his music with a powerful sense of urgency. Tenor John Chandler Bernard's voice opened up as the work progressed and was gorgeous during the “Hostias et preces tibi” solo from the offertory. Soprano Valerie Bernhardt was occasionally expressive and was most effective during parts of the “Libera Me,” but her voice did not project effectively in its lower register.

The event was well attended and given a lengthy standing ovation. The audience was absorbed in the message, and remained focused throughout this work which spans more than ninety minutes of music without intermission. In an age of distractions this performance spoke of grace, conviction, and concentrated virtuosity.