

Greenwich Citizen Review of March 15, 2009 concert:

Choral Society hums, drums and chants in spring concert

Fasten your seat belts whenever musical explorer and versatile director Paul F. Mueller conducts the Greenwich Choral Society. This year's spring concert, "Soundscapes," was decidedly not Easter as usual.

With electric programming and unusual interplays of voices, piano and percussion, the Greenwich Choral Society's concert at the Norwalk Concert Hall embraced many choral styles and highlighted, even stretched, the capabilities of the chorus, which rose to meet each challenge with verve and professionalism.

Opening with "One Voice," a quiet, intensely American piece by Daniel Gawthrop, the audience was lulled into the program with a rather old fashioned, high school concert choir-type favorite. It was a perfect opening work, and a metaphor for the program to come. The tender plea, "joining one voice to another" was profound, and the work closed in a touching resolution.

Mr. Mueller introduced "not About Cheese," a witty take on old nursery rhymes by Robert Convery, and told the audience they were free to laugh.

Again, the scoring was quite undramatic, and the lyrics could only be understood by reading along in the program, which was thorough, if unwieldy.

The sopranos floated high in the Goldilocks section, the a cappella sections sounded very fine, and the droll musical tale of Miss Muffet and the spider ended the work in a great major chord crescendo.

"Toccata" a bold choice

Then the fun really began. A quintet of exceptional percussionists performed Carlos Chavez's accomplished "Toccata," a work of "conservatory" merit according to the director, and a pounding, complex conversation in language of struck sounds and varied rhythms.

It was a thrilling and bold choice, and the ensemble, under principal Anthony deQuattro, was astonishing. Allegro, sempre giusto was pagan, stirring and irresistible, with the kettledrums pounding and snare drums sending bold messages as if to another society of a faraway hill. Largo, featuring bells, xylophone, whirring chimes, a gong, and insistent banging in beats of four, was intensely conversational, and climaxed in an ear shattering crescendo.

Allegro un poco marziale opened with a military statement in kettledrums, demanding and commanding, with maracas introduced.

The pounding intensified, wooden sticks were beaten together and the intense work closed to great applause.

Chorus performs "Cloudburst"

Composer Eric Whitacre has somehow tapped into the essential music of the universe in his "Cloudburst," a tour de force for the chorus.

Of exceptional difficulty, the work opened with multiple voices diffusing in soft half tones in an otherworldly dialogue, seeking always to connect.

A speaker intoned in Spanish. The voices kept searching, joining in an extended a cappella sequence, the chorus went slightly flat, but the find accompanist, James Kennerly, got them back with a rolling chord.

A beautiful section with interesting harmonics led to soaring soprano voices. Then the entire choir simply aspirated.

Cymbal and chimes entered, very ethereal, and the choir began roaring, with hand gestures, raised arms, fingers snapping, clapping, the drums signifying thunder and the heavens opening. A piano figure sounded, the thunder abated and the piece closed with the choir's snapping, signifying diminishing raindrops. It was a thrilling performance of an inventive work.

Off to the jungles of Brazil for Marcos Leite's "Tres Cantos Nativos dos Indios Krao," an interpretation of melodies sung by the Krao Indians of the Amazonian plain. The highlights were the rhythms and the chorus making jungle noises throughout, like monkeys chattering and birds cawing.

Soloists join choir

The evening's major work, "Carmina Burana," a cantata by German composer Carl Orff, featured professional soloists along with the songs featuring the charming St. Paul's Choristers.

Opening and closing the sprawling work is the hawking theme used in "The Omen" movies to signify the Devil's coming.

The work, wildly popular, is uneven, jumping from musical styles of operatic recitative to the Strauss waltz.

Baritone soloists Peter Clark was marvelous in "Omnia Sol temerat," and showed a beautiful voice and great stage presence with the chorus of tenors and basses in "Ego sum abbas."

He was matched by the lovely and lilting soprano voice of Tharanga Goonetilleke, particularly appealing in "Stetit puella." Tenor Jean Hebert's voice soared and the entire chorus performed with notable musicality and magnificence.

A standing ovation for the performers, with several curtain calls and many shouts of bravo, closed the performance.

The assembled talent was oddly balanced and employed. The soloists had very little to sing. The program itself was overly long and would not have suffered had "Not About Cheese" been omitted, along with repetitious passages in the Carmina Burana, scored or not.

The next concert of The Greenwich Choral Society, "Mozart Mania," will be held on May 2. For information and tickets, call 622-5136, or visit www.greenwichchoralsociety.org or www.GCS-sings.org.

Linda Phillips, a two time Pulitzer Prize nominee for her music review column in the Greenwich Citizen and her book, "To the Highest Bidder," is an amateur pianist and a former member of the performing duo Amor Artis. She writes on musical topics for Newport Life Magazine and won a "Best Column of the Year" award in 2002 from the Connecticut Press Club.