

Choral Society Christmas Concert hits emotional high note

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By Linda Phillips

What would we do without Paul Mueller?

With a meditative, Zen-like spirit and a performance of moving Christmas works of western European origins, the glorious Christmas Concert of the Greenwich Choral Society, "Nativitas," sang and lulled its sold-out audience into the holiday season.

A highlight of the concert was an original work by Greenwich's own composer/arranger/musician Rob Mathes, commissioned by GCS member Anne Marie Hynes as a highly personal love song to her husband, Jim.

Then there were the two supremely talented soloists, soprano Kerri Marcinko and baritone Jonathan Estabrooks, whose gifts for emotional evocation accompanied marvelous vocal presentation.

The procession of the chorus into the church, with candles and handbells, mystical and magical, transported the audience to another realm as the chorus sang the first movement of Benjamin Britten's "A Boy Was Born," with its recurring "Alleluia" and swelling crescendos, Dr. Mueller conducting from the center aisle.

The choristers, mounting the risers, paused for the long orchestral introduction to Gerald Finzi's "In Terra Pax," a magnificent work scored for the soprano, baritone, chorus and orchestra.

With its long, longing orchestral introduction, the piece is touching and tender, based on Robert Bridges' poem written on the eve of World War I. Lush and poignant, it moved from jovial to ponderous, its harmonies and melodies lovely.

As the beautiful voice of Marcinko rang out, a bassoon and cymbal sounded, leading to a full paean "glory to God," sounding like church bells. The tender solo voice of baritone Estabrooks sang an elegiac melody.

Beautiful and bucolic, this work is a perfect blending of voices and orchestra, embellished by solo statements, ending with a bell and a sustained and diminishing chord. Finzi, one of the most "English" of composers, was of Italian German Jewish descent, yet wrote wonderful Christian choral music such as this.

The audience was then asked to sing along in the traditional carol, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," in an arrangement by John Rutter.

Contemporary composer Bob Chilcott's "Anthem" was lovely and lyrical, with a sustained closing chord, movingly sung by the choir.

The "Benedicite" of Ralph Vaughan Williams begun with a clash of cymbals and a 1-2-3 recurring figure, diminished to a flute and chorus in "Praise Ye the Lord" with cascading chords, the piccolos trilling, the chorus dying away as a lone oboe sounded, ushering in the soprano soloist, who sang "Bless ye, Praise ye" while still evoking the beauty of the earth.

Full of modulations, new passages, changes of tempi, mood and dynamics, the work progressed to a rat-a-tat of drums, a crescendo, and again, the lovely voice of the soprano soloist in "Alleluia," a dense, diminished chord, then a hush.

Mueller then invited the audience to join the chorus in singing "Adestes Fideles."

Cecilia McDowall's "Regina Caeli," written in Latin, was notable for its dense diminished chords, interesting modulations, and basis in Gregorian chant. It, too, ended with a hush.

Said composer Mathes on "Always and Forevermore," "I decided to compose a trilogy of choral songs on love" based on the Haynes' May anniversary, shared Irish backgrounds, and lifelong love, incorporating poetry of J.M. Synge and Sara Teasdale.

The first movement, "May's Bright Morning," very melodic, began with a celestial harp echoing in the chorus, and an Irish reel with fiddles and Gaelic drums breaking out.

A narrative "Reach over the Bridges" led to a violin passage, seemingly joining heaven and earth, moving to a minor key.

The second movement, "With One Long Kiss" was poetry set to music, modern and akin to musical Broadway theater, handled nicely by the baritone, singing his lone romantic song. Moving back to Irish motifs for movement three, "Love, love, Let us Always Be Together" the chorus joining in, the work ended in a magnificent love song evoking both heaven and earth.

Mueller had a life-size cut-out of Mathes take a bow, since the composer was in Washington, D.C.

"Christus Natus Est" by Cecilia McDowall brought in a charming children's chorus.

In Latin that moved to French, then to English for the children's participation in "Infant Holy, Infant Lowly," it was utterly disarming.

The performance ended with "I Saw Three Ships," with an odd twist that had men in the audience whistling, and ladies singing "Ia," a bright ending to a shining performance.

Sometimes highly experimental and international, Conductor Mueller's programs for the Greenwich Choral Society's Christmas Concerts often awaken, educate and jar.

This Christmas concert was musically consistent, poignant and comprehensible, creating a harmonious universe of its own, in contrast to the world outside Greenwich's Christ Church.

The next performance of the Greenwich Choral Society, an uncommonly fine group, will be on Saturday, March 24, 2012 at 4:30 at Christ Church, Greenwich, and will feature "Alexander's Feast" by G.F. Handel. For tickets and information. go to www.greenwithchoralsociety.org.