

Symphony Review / Linda Phillips

Choral Society gives joyous, inspired Christmas concert

With three superb soloists and a program of creative contemporary works inspired by the birth of Christ, the Greenwich Choral Society recently gave a joyous, musically nuanced Christmas concert that engaged and elevated its audiences.

Gifted conductor Paul Mueller, now in his 14th year with the Greenwich Choral Society, always presents compositional mixes that are simply not heard anywhere else. The programming itself presents a rare musical experience.

Overcoming a stilted 2008 concert that interspersed music with readings, the chorus, orchestra, and singers simply owned the stage this year, inviting the audience to sing three traditional carols during a decidedly non-traditional, musically diverse program, which included works by living composers Morten Lauridsen, Stephen Paulus and Libby Larsen, as well as an African folk song in dialect, with clapping hands and native drum.

It was alchemy, and it was brilliant.

That the informing event of Christianity inspires composers in the 20th century to apply new musical forms and shadings validates its power, and its enduring resonance in the human imagination.

Other seasonal traditions were honored as well in folk song and the Nigerian Christmas song.

The chorus entered the darkened chapel of Christ Church carrying candles to the ringing of handbells, and sang a hushed "O Nata Lux," the central movement from Morten Lauridsen's "Lux Aeterna" (eternal light), then filed up to the risers in the nave. Magical, reverential and spiritual, the music transported the listeners to another realm, beyond time and place.

The oboe began the "Canticle of Mary" by Libby Larsen, joined by other instruments in a rolling figure, with Coplandesque chords. Female voices soared, with the double basses underneath playing pizzicato, a cornet sounding in an interesting orchestration.

Accomplished soprano soloist Tharange Goometilleke intoned "glory be thy name," with the female voices buzzing, oohing, little orchestral outbursts beneath, and a joyous swelling at the close.

Stephen Paulus's "So Hallow'd is the Time," a large work commissioned in 1980 by The Greenwich Choral Society, was the center piece of the concert.

A text from Shakespeare, and additional "libretti" came from John Milton, John Donne, William Dunbar, Robert Herrick, Robert Southwell, old carols, and anonymous writers.

The wonderful baritone soloist Keith Harris masterfully opened "So Hallow'd," and the first section ended in a dissonant; strident, Phantom-of-the-Opera-like chord. He was joined by tenor Kirk Dougherty in a sonnet by Donne.

In "And I Shall Syng," a lullaby with a recurring harp figure, with the remarkable boy soprano Eli Abbasi singing with soprano Goometilleke, hit beautiful high notes. The women's chorus was moving, singing "I Sing Thy Birth, Oh, Jesu!" in three-quarter time, with an intriguing orchestration, ending in a joyous "Jesu!"

An old carol, with a transporting "Hallelujah" a capella choral section, and ""Sing, Heaven Imperial," an urgent discourse with a throbbing finale, a dissonance resolving quickly to a majestic major chord, closed the work. The entire composition was notable for its orchestration, interwoven vocal motifs and the exciting uses of kettle drum, organ, and harp.

"Seven Joys of Christmas" wove into musical narrative everything we have ever known, felt, experienced, loved and feared about Christmas, taking traditional carols from many countries, including Japan, Spain, England and Burgundy.

"Betelehemu" was a clapping, rhythmic, tribal delight sung in the Yoruba dialect. It was followed by a tender "I Wonder as I Wander," and a very jazzy arrangement of "Go Tell It on the Mountain," with a soprano solo and syncopated kicks and beats, punctuated by the tambourine.

The Choral Society singers showed remarkable sophistication and polish throughout this performance, all vocal sections excellent in performing the intricacies of the program. The soloists sang with wonderful, mature voices and showed superb musicianship.

A note about the orchestra: the exceptional arrangements, one by Kirke Mechem, were played beautifully, with such attention to balance, solo passages, and interaction with the voices that the listener could only marvel.

The percussionists were outstanding in their ability to switch from gourds to tambourine to drums, and the organist, Assistant Director James Kennerley, was expert. The oboist, clarinetist, cornetist, and double bassist, were all notable.

It was an elevating, superb, and soaring concert experience, an inspiring beginning of the holiday season.

The next performance of the GCS will be a Gershwin Valentine on February 14, 2010, at the Norwalk Concert Hall, featuring a New York All-Star Big Band and a silent auction. For information on this performance on go to GCSAuction-cmarket.com.

For information on the Greenwich Choral Society, visit www.greenwichchoralsociety.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 was a 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.