

Choral Society closing stunning

Jeffrey Johnson, Correspondent

STAMFORD -- It is infrequent in this accelerated, text-messaging age that we have the opportunity to gather and focus on anything with complete attention for 90 minutes.

But the audience gathered in the Palace Theatre in Stamford to hear Antonin Dvorák's "Stabat Mater" performed by the Greenwich Choral Society with the Westchester Choral Society conducted by Paul F. Mueller sat in rapt attention -- there was no intermission, no introductory words from the stage, and no applause until the entire work concluded.

It was great.

"Stabat Mater" is about the grieving process. Written in two different phases of Dvorák's life while grieving for the unexpected death of three of his children, this work begins with the circular and erratic emotions of intense mourning, and gradually finds its way toward acceptance and even toward an expression of something like emotional freedom in the final movement.

The lengthy opening movement was guided efficiently by Mueller, and the chorus produced warm legato sound with clear diction that served them well in the contrapuntal passages.

The combine chorus, prepared by Mueller and Frank Nemhauser (music director of the Westchester Choral Society), was ready to surmount all challenges in this work.

Tenor Charles Reid shook the walls with his entrance. He focused on the operatic drama of the work as he took the audience from B minor into D major for one of those passages in Dvorák that seems even more devastating in major than it had been in the minor key. Reid had a tendency to dominate ensembles, but his voice was so interesting we did not mind.

Bass soloist Nicholas Masters brought narrative clarity to his music. In the fourth movement, "Fac ut ardeat cor meum (Make me feel as you have felt)," his interaction with the divided sopranos and altos of the choir was expressive and helped move the impact of the music into a phase where healing would eventually seem possible.

Dvorák's "Stabat Mater" doesn't give the solo soprano many opportunities to shine, but soprano Inna Dukach managed to make an impression with careful ensemble balances and expressive vocal shadings in her duet with the tenor.

She frequently created floating and crystal clear high notes that were surprising in their impact.

Mezzo-soprano soloist Dana Beth Miller sang with an arresting quality, particularly in her solo movement "Inflamatus," where she was able to maintain the heightened drama needed for the movement.

The mark of a successful performance of the "Stabat Mater" can be measured by how good it feels when the combined forces break into the fast tempo of the concluding "Amen."

The chorus handled the tricky chromatic lines with grace and efficiency and the quickly moving vocal lines sounded accurate and edgy. The soloists could be heard in the midst of this big texture, and the orchestra played quite well, as they did throughout the evening.

Muller froze in place as the final chord faded. He didn't move until applause broke through the hall.

The performance was well-received. This was a grand way to close the season for the Greenwich Choral Society.