

What's Playing?: Greenwich Choral Society's "Nativitas"

by Arden Anderson-Broecking

New Canaan News Online; Friday, December 9, 2011

I hadn't heard the Greenwich Choral Society in a long time, but was able to go to hear its Christmas concert, "Nativitas," on Saturday afternoon, and this was fortuitous indeed, because there was a world premiere, "Always and Forevermore," a song cycle for chorus, baritone solo and chamber orchestra, by Greenwich resident and Emmy nominee, Rob Mathes, a prolific "crossover" composer and arranger for many of the classy contemporary singers.

This new work was commissioned for the Greenwich Choral Society in honor of a very special wedding anniversary (not exactly Christmas, but on the other hand...), and it was absolutely beautiful. The texts were also by Mathes, except for the second movement, "One Long Kiss," which was from poetry by J. M. Synge and Sara Teasdale.

Combining an affectionate breeziness of style, a gentle hint of Irish heritage and deep melody, this expressive piece is a gem of devotion and love, and hopefully will have a long performing life.

The Christmas music that made up the rest of the program was by British composers. Britten, Vaughan Williams and Gerard Finzi were represented, and also Rutter, Chilcott and Cecilia McDowall, who was new to me.

A candlelight procession opened the concert, and the music then unfolded the beautiful story. Vaughn Williams' "Benedicite" was gorgeous, as was Finzi's "In terra, pax." McDowall's "Christus Natus Est, A Cantata for Christmas" was a flowing melodic arrangement of five traditional French carols, adding a lovely children's choir, I also like McDowall's setting of the hymn, "Regina Coeli." This program was obviously chosen with care and reverence, both for the music and for the season.

There were two soloists, soprano, Kerri Marcinko, who has a clear, vibrant sound, excellent musicianship, and on this occasion, a gentle, generous presence. She is most promising.

The baritone, Jonathan Estabrooks, was at his best in the Mathes piece, to which his sweet voice was better suited than in the Finzi. Paul Mueller, the conductor of the GCS for some years now, has brought this ensemble forward on many ways.

Their full voices blend in a velvety curtain of sound, and for so large a group, their clean diction is amazing. The orchestra, also responding to Mueller's clear signals, were far more than just accompanists. By the way, the audience was invited to sing, too, in several familiar carols, which enhanced the afternoon even more for everyone.