

Greenwich Time, April 21, 2014

TIME OUT: PAUL MUELLER

## **Greenwich Choral Society celebrates 90 years of high notes**

By Jim Wolfe

The Greenwich Choral Society will celebrate its 90th birthday this year so we thought it would be the perfect time to take a Time Out with the group's musical director, Paul Mueller. We asked Mueller about the group, his role in it and some of the highlights of his time there.

### **Q: What is the Choral Society and what is its mission?**

**A:** The Greenwich Choral Society was founded as the Sound Beach Choral Society in the fall of 1924 (October 11, 1924) with its first performance on June 2, 1925, featuring 24 singers and six instrumentalists. Over the almost 90 years in between, the Greenwich Choral Society has grown to over 130 auditioned singers supported by superb professional orchestras and soloists for its 5 to 6 concerts a year - the holiday concert in December is repeated three times. Our mission is the pursuit of excellence in the choral art, to provide educational and entertaining programs in public concert and, on a smaller scale, for local schools and community organizations. It also awards music scholarships to nurture aspiring singers and encourages young people to join the group in singing the great classical choral literature. To date, GCS has awarded over 30 music scholarships to aspiring high school students in the region.



Paul Mueller directs the Greenwich Choral Society during a 2013 performance of Mozart's Requiem concert at Christ Church Greenwich.

### **Q: Who makes up the group?**

**A:** The Greenwich Choral Society, a not-for-profit membership-based organization primarily serving Fairfield (CT) and Westchester (NY) counties offering avocational singers of all ages and backgrounds an opportunity to learn more about music and to raise their voices in excellent company and under professional direction. The Greenwich Choral Society has consistently explored and interpreted the beauty and influence of music. GCS strives to enrich our community's appreciation of music through performances of the highest quality and educational programs that seek to nurture future singers and audiences alike.

**Q: What is your role (and what are your responsibilities)?**

**A:** As music director, it is my responsibility to motivate the membership through rigorous rehearsal preparation and inspire our audience through innovative programming. In between are the ongoing tasks of auditioning new members and re-auditioning current members, hiring orchestras, engaging soloists, preparing scores for the singers and instrumentalists, writing program notes, and the never ending task of organizing the many details of every concert. I have the assistance of many wonderful volunteers from within the chorus as well as my talented assistant conductor and accompanist, James Wetzel.

**Q: How about an idea, a range, of the types of works you perform?**

**A.** Although the Greenwich Choral Society primarily performs classical choral masterpieces, we are not limited to this single genre of music and have frequently ventured into opera, musical theatre, jazz, not to mention many difficult compositions by 20th century composers. Mixed in with the performances of works by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms, or Rossini, our audience will also find the appealing works of composers such as Rutter, Verdi, Gershwin, local composer Rob Mathes, and less well-known names. The Choral Society has also commissioned and/or premiered many works and that list includes the following: I Have A Dream, with James Furman, April, 1970 • La Fiesta de la Posada, with Dave Brubeck, December 1975 • So Hallow'd Is The Time, with Stephen Paulus, December 1980 • The Lord Has A Child, with William Schuman, June 1990 • After the Meridian: Times of Future Passed, with Michael Schelle, December, 1991 • Bells, Bells, Bells: A Song & A Carol, with Rob Mathes, December 1991 • A Celebration of Christmas, with Paul Hofreiter, December 1993 • Christmas Hymns for Children, with Marjorie Gifford, December 1993 • Songs of Innocence, with Adolphus Hailstork, December 2000 • Smiling Child, with Shafer Mahoney, December 2005 • Always and Forevermore, with Rob Mathes, December 2011

**Q: Do you have any personal favorites to perform – in terms of pieces or composers?**

**A:** Most conductors will answer this question by citing the works they are currently preparing! At the moment, GCS is immersed in the process of preparing works by Brahms, Mendelssohn and Dvorak for our May 3, 2014 performance at Norwalk Concert Hall. Brahms' Nänie will be on this May program, an elegy based on an ode by Schiller, and this work has always been one of my favorites. With a smile on my face, I can honestly say I would love to be able to conduct Verdi's Requiem at least once a year, but it is an expensive work to produce and, fortunately, I love the challenge of variety. I am happy when we are simply performing good music, whether that is Gershwin, Britten, Gounod or Bach!

**Q: Who are some of the guest stars the group has performed with over the years?**

**A:** I do try to identify young emerging artists, but over the years we have been fortunate to have collaborated with some of the following individuals and ensembles. Individuals: Andrew Armstrong, piano • Dave Brubeck, piano • Jerome Carrington, cello • Clamma Dale,

soprano • Eugene Friesen, cello • Rabbi Jon R. Haddon, reader • Rob Mathes, composer • Robert Sherman, commentator Ensembles: Allegra Dance Theatre • American Boychoir • Albermarle Children's Choir • American Symphony Orchestra • Boys of St. Thomas Choir • Caramoor Music Festival • The Children's Choir of Christ Church • Christ Church Choirboys • Coros Almenares de Nerja, Spain • Fairfield County Children's Choir • Fairfield County Chorale • Greenwich Academy Madrigal Singers • Greenwich Children's Choir • Greenwich Symphony Orchestra - Dual Concerts, 1974, 1982, 1984, 1992 and "Greenwich Pops Into Summer" Programs • Harlem Boys' Choir • Manhattan Chorus • New Canaan High School Madrigal Ensemble • New Haven Chorale • New York Philharmonic Orchestra • Orchestra of St. Luke's • Prayer Tabernacle Church Mass Choir • Pro Arte Chorale, Connecticut • Pro Arte Chorale, New Jersey • The Sanctuary Choir of the Union Baptist Church • Silver-mine Festival • St. Cecilia Girls' Choir, Christ Church • Stamford Symphony • Westchester Choral Society • Westchester Festival Chorus • Western Connecticut State College Chorus • Yale Concert Choir • The Young People's Chorus of New York City



The Greenwich Choral Society was formed in 1924. Below, Paul Mueller has been the Musical Director of the Greenwich Choral Society since 1996.



**Q: Are there any particular performances that really stand out in your memory, where everything was just perfect?**

**A:** Our recent March 2014 performance of Rossini's Petite Messe Solennelle was simply divine and a real "standout" for the chorus. I also have very fond memories of our performances of Brahms' Ein deutsches Requiem and Carl Orff's Carmina Burana. I am certain everyone would have a slightly different list, but I most cherish the moments when the chemistry between the audience and chorus is visceral, and our fairly recent performance of Gershwin's Concert Suite from Porgy and Bess was one of those moments. Also high on my list are performances we gave in Europe while on tour. I remember a performance of Mozart's Requiem in Budapest and the frenzied ovation at the end of the performance that demanded nine curtain calls and the encore performance of Ave Verum Corpus, not once but twice! We enjoyed the thrill of performing for High Mass at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and a memorable 4th of July performance at the US Embassy in Paris.

**Q: The group turned 90 this year. What do you attribute the success and longevity to?**

**A:** This is our 90th season, but we will celebrate our actual 90th birthday this fall. The success and longevity of this organization rests solely on the dedicated energy of the members of this remarkable organization. They rehearse endlessly, serve on committees, sell tickets, participate in fund-raisers and love a good party after a job well done! Without such a dedicated membership, this organization would have withered long ago. The real tribute is to our past and current membership!

**Q: What is the group doing to celebrate?**

**A:** We are holding a special Reunion celebration at the final Concert of our 90th Season, inviting former choristers, soloists and scholarship recipients to perform Brahms' How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place with the current Chorus at the top of the second half of the concert. Those who wish to participate should contact us via our website at [www.greenwichchoralsociety.org](http://www.greenwichchoralsociety.org). We are also planning a birthday party to commemorate the 90th anniversary of our founding in the Fall of 2014 to which longtime friends of GCS and community leaders will be invited.

**Q: What are the biggest challenges facing the group going forward?**

**A:** Maintaining a vital, committed membership is one of the biggest challenges of the future. It should be no shock to hear that our society has changed as well as the demographics of the region. As a result, it has been disturbing to see some of the amateur community choruses in the area wither. That said, it is a small miracle that the Greenwich Choral Society has been able to maintain its health, both musically and financially, through all of these changes. We have made significant efforts in recruiting new, younger members, and I hope this trend continues for the future health of the organization. Our challenge is to make the best use of the media available to inform our broader community about our programs and to attract audiences of all ages in the region and continue to foster an appreciation of classical choral music.

**Q: What is next for you and the Choral Society?**

**A:** We are busy planning the 2014-2015 concert season which will include our traditional Christmas concert in December 2014, a March performance of the Mozart REQUIEM with the Stamford Symphony Orchestra, and a program of operatic excerpts in May. More details about the Greenwich Choral Society can be found at <http://www.greenwichchoralsociety.org/>.

Editor's note

"Time Out" is a weekly Q&A offering insight into familiar names and introducing others you'll want to know better. Have a suggestion on whom we should take a "Time Out" with? Email [gtcitydesk@scni.com](mailto:gtcitydesk@scni.com) or call 203-625-4410.