

Sunday, December 14, 2008

# Choral society presents heavenly concert

By Jeffrey Johnson  
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"The aungels sungen the shepherds to: 'Gloria in excelsis Deo.'" This lovely line, sung with old English pronunciation, was part of an irresistible performance by the Greenwich Choral Society, called "Christmas Readings and Roundelays," at Christ Church Greenwich.

The quotation comes from the third movement in Benjamin Britten's "Ceremony of Carols," "There is no Rose." Treble voices in the choir connected this phrase with a powerful curved melodic line into a bright A-major chord. The vibrancy was a perfect contrast to the text chanted on middle-C that surrounds it.

"There is no Rose" anchored a performance supported by lively harp accompaniment by Ashley Jackson, who also gave careful attention to silences and cut-offs in her playing that made for an exceptional rhythmic clarity.

Conductor Paul F. Mueller developed this ambitious and dense program with great musical sense, and negotiated the procession of works with efficiency. As a result of his energy and intelligence, the music came across as a summation rather than as fragment.

The performance began with a processional in which the chorus enveloped the audience. Standing in a circle

along our perimeter, with candles lit and pentatonic bells ringing, they sang the anthem "Sweetly the Bells are Ringing" in an arrangement by Karsten Gundermann. Harmony came from all directions inside Christ Church.

After the processional was completed, we heard a carefully constructed series of pieces including the "Lauda per la Natività del Signore" by Ottorino Respighi, the "Fanfare and Hodie!" by Z. Randall Stroope, and one-half of the "Ceremony of Carols."

In between these larger works were jewel-like anthems, carols and readings. These carols included the "Angels We have Heard on High," in an arrangement by Anthony Sbordoni, where the audience sang the second and third verses and refrains, while the chorus sang musical decorations, filigree and ornaments. The chorus made eye contact with the audience from time to time, welcoming us into an ensemble. This created warmth.

There was also an angel in the Respighi "Lauda." Soprano Mary Ellen Callahan emerged from the dancing sound of double reeds to open this music with presence and grace. She consistently projected joy and precision.

Tenor Antonio Abate, who sang the role of the Shepherd, brought a transfixed, ecstatic quality of sound to his

music, which he produced with great clarity. Mezzo-Soprano Holly Sorensen sang the chromatic music of Mary with earthy warmth and anchored a lovely ensemble with Callahan in the closing section of the work.

The chorus displayed its mastery in the rhythmic qualities of the madrigal "Contenti n'andremo" and produced wonderful sonority in many passages, like "O fonte de' alimento" ("O fountain of beauty"), and in the contrapuntal complexities of the Gloria.

We also heard a "Fanfare" and a three-movement "Hodie!" by Z. Randall Stroope. Opening with strong gestures in a quickly shifting 7-meter, this work made bold statements. It was supported with solid and effective brass and percussion playing.

The event had intensity. Though ambitious, it might have benefitted from a program that allowed a slightly more relaxed pacing. Nonetheless, this is a chorus with fantastic concentration and stamina. It was an event that set the mood for the holiday season ahead.