

Choral Society's "Gershwin Valentine" features Big Band, nostalgia

In his never-ending experiment with innovative programming, Greenwich Choral Society conductor Paul Mueller set the Ryan Keberle Big Band squarely in front of the chorus, then let them steal the show, acoustically and musically, at the GCS Valentine's Day concert at the Norwalk Concert Hall.

Featuring dapper baritone Edward Pleasant, who sang, danced and emoted his way through Gershwin and other tunes, the concert was spontaneous, fun and foot-tapping – and more than a little bit odd.

With the hoopla and a silent auction that had begun online taking place in the outer lobbies, the intermission was protracted to allow final bidding. Overall, the attention to pure music was not as great as the GCS's more sanctified, focused performances, where it the top act.

Opening with a jazzed up trill-and-slide into Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," the terrific baritone saxophonist Carl Maraghi handed off to a muted trumpet, which took plenty of liberties with Gershwin's score in an arrangement by the great Billy Strayhorn.

With some musical motifs straight from the 50s, like the show slink from the score of "Walk on the Wild Side," Keberle created a brassy swelling that was thrilling, with the audience breaking into spontaneous applause after each soloist.

Nice work by the pianist Isaac Ben Ayala, wearing a gangster-like fedora throughout, led to a dissonant ending.

The band moved on to "I Can't Stop Loving You," á la Count Basie, a straightforward arrangement with that kind of insistent strip joint beat, shades of Harry James on the trumpet, and a great trombone solo.

There was a little Rat Pack sound thrown in with "Fly Me To The Moon," sung precisely by Mr. Pleasant, but creating a longing for Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr. and their Las Vegas lounge show style.

The chorus, which had been sitting on risers in red and looking decorative, rose for Gershwin's "S'Wonderful" accompanied by piano and reminding us of the composer's Broadway scores, delightfully old-fashioned.

A percussive, flat-out band version of "Airmail Special" brought back the sheer exuberant joy of the World War II era music.

"Cupid's Nightmare" showed the disparity in sound strength between the chorus and the band. It was like one's jazzy, loud uncle performing with one's sweet grandmother.

The band simply owned a Gil Evans arrangement of "Summertime," with the great Ryan Keberle himself on trombone, a climbing figure in horns and dissonant chords behind.

A small group of Choral Society members shone brightly in an a cappella version of "Love Walked In," ethereal, with a nice modulation, and setting the perfect mood.

In the 50s, dancers Cyd Charisse and James Mitchell performed to this tune on a TV special, and the room and people simply fell away when their eyes met. This is just the tender emotion that the singers created.

Then the band seized the chordal structure for that tune, spelled it backwards as “Evol Deklaw Ni,” and played it without the melody (or perhaps with the melody backwards), incorporating allusions to other tunes, the screaming horns reminiscent of Stan Kenton’s Orchestra. They showed themselves to be a great and accomplished group of musicians.

A Bobby Troup arrangement of “Route 66,” sung at a slow tempo by Mr. Pleasant, didn’t quite work, and was as flat as the highway itself.

The finale featured two tunes from “Porgy and Bess,” and Mr. Pleasant’s operatic voice was shown to full advantage in “It Ain’t Necessarily So” and “I’m on my Way,” when the band, chorus and soloist finally struck the proper balance and performed equally.

Throughout the performance, the sound system was out of balance. The microphone was too low for Mr. Keberle and Mr. Mueller’s announcements, and was sometimes problematic for Mr. Pleasant’s vocals.

His voice is a bit too trained and polished for the down-and-dirty renditions required by some of the songs, which are pop standards.

Pumpkin pit with Martinis? Lemon meringue with mustard? An unusual and not necessarily balanced musical pairing of band and chorus nonetheless delivered a great afternoon of music.

The next performance of the GCS will be on March 7 at 4 p.m. at Greenwich’s Christ Church, and will feature music of Duruflé, Poulenc, and Fauré. For information and tickets, call 203-622-5136 or email Greenwich.choral@verizon.net.

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