

Greenwich Choral Society examines themes of war and peace

By Linda Phillips

The Greenwich Choral Society recently examined the towering subjects of war and peace in Greenwich's magnificent Christ Church from both musical and historical perspectives.

The concert, "Of War and Peace," featured an excellent orchestra and four stellar soloists" soprano Tharanga Goonetilleke, mezzo soprano Maria Elena Armijo, Tenor Chad Cygan and baritone Edward Pleasant.

It was comprised of selections ranging from Joseph Haydn's "Mass in the Time of War," composed in 1796, to Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem," premiered in 1962.

The Choral Society also performed shorter works by Karl Jenkins, Vincent Persichetti, Felix Mendelssohn and Michael Tippett and closed, oddly, with a group of spirituals and a rousing audience sing-along of "Down by the Riverside," originally U.S. Civil War era rumination

Gifted music director and conductor Dr. Paul Mueller chose to create three distinct musical modules within the concert: the first selections were consonant, classical and evoked emotion and concern without immediacy.

Opening with the "Verheit uns Frieden" of Mendelssohn and the "Mass in Time of War" of Haydn (a five-section work giving voice to the composer's unrest over the looming Napoleonic war), this module was philosophical and evoked the diplomatic, intellectual and moral aspects of war.

The second module plunged the chorus, orchestra and audience into the trenches and the ugly experience of warfare with stomping, marching feet in Jenkins's "The Armed Man," with the chorus intoning the loud dissonance of battle, evoked by powerful horns. The Agnus Dei from Britten's slamming, condemning "War Requiem" highlighted verbal and musical expression.

The module closed with Persichetti's "Song of Peace," this musical grouping experiential.

The third module, comprised of familiar spirituals, was arranged and grouped by Michael Tippett and gave the soloists the opportunity to sing them out.

The opening Mendelssohn work began in cello and bassoon, with male voices rising and female voices joining and the chorus giving a lovely trilling. The guest soloists appeared, the opening Kyrie showing the light, clear, lovely voice of soprano Tharanga Goonetilleke, with mezzo soprano Maria Elena Armijo joining.

The Credo was beautifully performed by the chorus, as was the following Sanctus, light and fugal. The cello, oboe and bassoon sounded, with wonderful baritone soloists Edward Pleasant singing a Miserere.

The Sanctus featured cascading voices and a soprano solo – Ms. Goonetilleke is a serious star – and ended in amen, while the Benedictus featured the full quartet of soloists including excellent tenor Chad Cygan, and ended in meditative majesty. The concluding Agnus Dei was contemplative, moving to exaltation.

"The Armed Man" evoked marching soldiers with its beat of feet, the drum and piccolo joined by horns in a sennet. Building on the theme, the work moved to counterpoint and became increasingly strident. It was an artistic commentary on regimentation, creating great unease up to its powerful close.

Tenor Chad Cygan was featured in the Agnus Dei section of the Britten, as the slow, intense work unfolded. The accomplished tenor invoked the words of the great poet of World War I, Wilfred Owen, in a plea for peace. This massive work is a great pacifist statement, a heartfelt cry.

Persichetti's "Song of Peace" opened with glistening chords, full of quiet, sad harmonies with organ played by James Wetzel.

On to the spirituals: "Steal Away" featured a gorgeously arranged tenor solo with soprano voice. "By and By" again featured the glorious voice of the soprano while baritone Pleasant shone in "Go Down Moses."

Then the audience participated in the last verse of "Down by the Riverside," and was asked to shake hands with their neighbors and, symbolically, people around the world.

A junior chorus performed a Dona Nobis Pacem.

The Choral Society, soloists, and orchestra gave thoughtful, emotional and skillful performances of each of these differing works, and were greeting at the conclusion by cries of "Bravo!" and delighted whistles and shouts.

The gracious soloists then moved up the aisle, stopping to shake hands with the audience – a great piece of theater.

Conductor Mueller chose to quote these lines of poetry by Alfred Lord Tennyson to describe the concert's goal: "Ring out the thousand wars of old, Ring in the thousand years of peace."

The next performance of the Greenwich Choral Society will be the Dvorak "Stabat Mater" on May 21 at the Palace Theater in Stamford. Tickets are available at 203-325-4466.

Linda Phillips, a two-time Pulitzer Prize nominee for her music review column in the Greenwich Citizen, is an amateur pianist and was a member of the performing duo Amor Artis. She writes on musical topics for Newport Life Magazine and won a Best Criticism/Review award in 2009 from the Connecticut Press Club. You can reach her at phillipscommun@yahoo.com.