

Greenwich Choral Society 'meditates' on war, peace

By Jeffrey Johnson, Correspondent

The Greenwich Choral Society's March event in Christ Church in Greenwich was described in the program as "a special choral meditation on the cost of war and the hope for peace."

Conductor Paul F. Mueller created a blended sound for this "meditation."

He arranged singers in a mixed formation onstage with unlike vocal parts positioned next to one another. A challenge for singers, who normally rehearse with soprano, alto, tenor and bass parts grouped into separate sections, the mixed formation produced an edgy sound that contributed to the message of the event.

The program opened with a gentle plea for peace called "Verleih uns Frieden," by Felix Mendelssohn.

The three single stanza invocations that comprise this evocative work are designed to develop in density; the first stanza is for bass singers alone, the second for alto and bass, and the final stanza presents the entire chorus.

While the choral sound was well-balanced in this performance, the impact of this work was less effective than it could have been, since all the men sang the first stanza and all men and women sang the second stanza.

Since everyone was already singing in the second stanza, the third stanza did not blossom.

The first half of the program centered on the "Missa in tempore belli (Mass in a Time of War)," by Joseph Haydn. This impressive work was given a detailed and careful performance.

The GCS created a huge sound in the Credo where the blur of successive lines entering in counterpoint were merged with great care as the first section came to cadence.

Haydn is famous for his "Surprise" Symphony in which a sudden loud sound emerges in a quiet passage during the second movement. The "surprise" in the Credo is a sudden extended silence in the midst of loud music.

Mueller cut this passage clean, waited, and then brought the ensemble through the next passage in whispery quiet singing before re-emerging in vibrant loud music to close the movement.

The quartet of soloists was fabulous -- individually and, even more rare, as an ensemble.

Soprano Tharanga Goonetilleke, mezzo-soprano Maria Elena Armijo, tenor Chad Cygan, and bass Edward Pleasant brought a delightful presence to the solo music and to the interaction between soloists and the choir.

After intermission we heard marching before we heard singing. "The Armed Man (L'Homme Arme)" from "The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace," by Karl Jenkins opens with the singers marching in place and developed into a powerful series of colorful orchestral interjections and choral statements.

The "Agnus Dei: from Benjamin Britten's War Requiem" was given a riveting performance by tenor soloist Cygan, who sang with rainbow colors in a powerful and dramatic high register. The grouping closed with Vincent Persichetti's "Song of Peace."

One of the simplest and most touching moments of the event was 10 young singers who came together to chant the Dona Nobis Pacem in Latin, Hebrew, then Arabic. As they sang the audience was joined by the orchestra and all singers on stage in listening to them with closest possible attention. It hit home.

The evening closed with John Rutter's arrangement of "Down by the Riverside." The audience sang the last verse while shaking hands - with each other, but also with the soloists who made their way up the center aisle of the church. It was a festive end to a program that asked us to contemplate both dark and light in human nature.