

Choral Society performance features fine soloists and majestic Bach

Linda Phillips

Encircling the audience like a living wreath, ringing hand bells and holding candles in the hushed dark of Christ Church, the Greenwich Choral Society once again sang its enchanted audience into the Christmas season.

At last weekend's performance, the Society, under the baton of its marvelous conductor Paul Mueller, performed three sections of the exalted Mass in B Minor, by Johann Sebastian Bach, a masterwork of the repertory, along with traditional carols of German origin, in a program titled "Christmas in Germany."

And then there were the four astonishing young soloists, each with voices from heaven itself.

Conducting from the center aisle, Mr. Mueller led the choristers in "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" in modulated tones, setting the stage for the musical evocation of the event of Christ's birth. For listeners of whatever religion, or none, the seasonal musical repertory is still a magnificent series of canticles and divine orchestral works. And the program book itself is nothing short of a tutorial in the origins of the music and its history, including full translations of the German text.

Accompanied by an orchestra of period instruments, including the oboe d'amore, brasses, and an interestingly fretted double bass, the chorus' opening selection was Bach's Advent, the 4th movement of Cantata 140, now sung often as a well-known hymn, which was a showcase for magnificent young tenor David Abrams, who performed wondrously, his voice commanding and articulated.

The profound, dark Kyrie of the B Minor Mass moved in fugue style from section to section of the chorus, which was accompanied by the instrumental ensemble, given its own fine orchestral passage. In the duet "Christ Have Mercy Upon Us," soaring soprano Kathryn Lewek and the fine alto Teresa Bucholz sang movingly against the string section, interplaying with the chorus. Both beautiful to behold, as well as to hear, the singers were a visual and vocal joy. The use of the quartet of soloists, including bass-baritone John Maynard Burton, is integral throughout this work, with near-perfect balance achieved with duets, soloists, quartet, and chorus excellent.

The Gloria opened in triple meter, an affirmation and ode to heaven, then the mood saddened, the sopranos entering gently, with a return to a profoundly joyful passage. Miss Lewek's soprano solo was affecting, and the alto and tenor duet by Miss Bucholz and Mr. Abrams was praiseworthy indeed. The work ended with the full five-part chorus in a resounding Amen.

On to traditional, sing-along carols, in which the audience lustily joined in "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," then a choral reading of "Birth at Bethlehem," and a motet by Johann Michael Bach, shouting "Glory to God." The audience was again invited to sing "Silent Night."

And what would the season be without Handel? The chorus performed that composer's "Zion's Daughter," which opened with altos and cellos, a horn restating the melody, then a stirring alto and soprano duet, of which chorus and orchestra reprised the theme, ending with the resounding beat of the kettledrum.

"Three Kings," sung by the magnificent bass Mr. Burton, with chorus joining in, was excellently realized. The audience sang along with "Good Christian Men, Rejoice," leading to the Sanctus from the Bach Mass, which is an exultant shout for joy, with full orchestral ensemble and chorus at peak performance.

Paul Mueller arranges glorious programming, brings brilliant young artists to Greenwich, and honors the abilities of the Greenwich Choral Society, and all listeners with his excellence, scholarship and detail. Bravo, Maestro Mueller!

The programming, which was more liturgical and perhaps less intriguing than some previous concerts, did not allow quite enough of the soloists. We yearned to hear more of their magnificent voices.

The audience gave the conductor, orchestra, and soloists a standing ovation for a stellar performance. Conductor Mueller congratulated concertmaster Netta Hadari. Notable were organist James Kennerley, principal oboist Marta Boragis, Leelanee Sterrett on horn, and Michael de Quattro on timpani.

The next concert of the Greenwich Choral Society, "Of War and Peace," will be on March 5, 2011, and will include works by Samuel Barber, Benjamin Britten and Vincent Persichetti. For information, call 203-622-5136 or go to www.GreenwichChoralSociety.org.

Linda Phillips' column in the Greenwich Citizen won the 2010 Best Column of the Year/Criticism award from the Connecticut Press Club, and was so honored in 2002. Both her novel To the Highest Bidder, and her music column were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 2004. A freelance writer, she also publishes an award-winning online social magazine in Newport, RI.