

Greenwich Choral Society concert just divine

By Jeffrey Johnson, Correspondent

Handbells started to ring inside the Christ Church in Greenwich. The Greenwich Choral Society walked around the perimeter of the audience, enclosing us. It was 2 PM, the first of two performances on Saturday of a program called "Christmas in Germany."

The bells sounded like wind chimes, but hidden within the pentatonic tones was F major, the key of the first work, "es ist ein Ros entsprungen," by Michael Praetorius. Early 17th century harmony emerging from the resonance of bells in a natural and pleasantly surprising way as the choir began to sing. The Greenwich Choral Society embraced us in sound.

The program was centered on the challenging B Minor Mass by Bach. The GCS performed the massive Kyrie and nine-part Gloria of the work and then closed the event with the Sanctus. In between these sonic pillars were carols, a chorale and a most interesting motet.

There were some magnificent moments in the Mass. Mueller took the opening Kyrie at a blindingly fast tempo, which helped spring the long arcing vocal phrases.

The second Kyrie began to accelerate as the counter theme was developed midway through the work and it closed with a thrilling sense of conviction.

The complex figuration of the "propter magnum" section of the Gratias agimus tibi was clean and articulate, and the chorus sounded triumphant throughout the "Cum Sancto Spiritu."

The GCS was helped by a fantastic orchestral performance. Every major solo came across fluently. Concertmaster Netta Hadari played the solo violin part so that it sounded like a second vocal soloist in the Laudamus te, which was also taken at a very quick tempo.

The soloists, soprano Katheryn Lewek, mezzo-soprano Teresa Bucholz, tenor David Adams, and bass-baritone John Maynard Burton were all effective in sound, but were frequently covered by the orchestra. It was also hard to hear the text. One wonders if a different location on stage would have helped them to be heard; the acoustics of the Christ Church has a tendency to swallow details.

There were two choral jewels hidden within the massive sonic pillars that surrounded them. The first was a chorale, "O Jesulein süß" from the Schemelli Songbook as harmonized by Bach. Lewek sang the first verse in resonant simplicity against a continuo accompaniment. The chorus echoed the German verse in English with a fuller orchestral accompaniment.

Then we heard the lively rhythmic motet "Ehre sie Gott in der Höhe" by Johann Michael Bach, who was a cousin to Bach's father Johann Ambrosius (and also the father of Bach's first wife.) The Bach family produced a significant amount of music before Johann Sebastian was born, and it was a wonderful surprise to hear this motet, performed with such care and consideration.

The Greenwich Choral Society gave us a Christmas concert that was different from the standard holiday fare. It was an ambitious program, well-designed, well-performed and well-received.

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