

SYMPHONY REVIEW / Linda Phillips

Thrilling Verdi “Requiem” by Greenwich Choral Society

It rested with inspired collaboration. The wonderful Greenwich Choral Society and its conductor, Dr. Paul Mueller, joining with the Hunter College Festival Orchestra, the College's chorus and four strong soloists, created a glorious performance of Verdi's complex, demanding “Messa da Requiem.”

Presented at the Palace Theatre in Stamford to allow for the double chorus, the setting was reminiscent of a European concert hall, with the venue's Baroque architecture informing mood. It was notable that the date was Pentecost Sunday, known as the birthday of the Christian church, since the presentation favored the liturgical, rather than operatic qualities inherent in the work.

The young concertmaster, Bruno Penna, took the stage to applause, and was followed by the conductor and soloists Valeria Bernhardt, soprano; Ann McMahon Quintero, mezzo-soprano; John Chandler Bernard, tenor; and Kevin Deas, bass; operatic performers who seated themselves in a decorous row in front of the chorus.

In seven sections, the “Requiem” opened with a slow, dolorous cello statement, joined by the chorus singing requiem aeternum. The music was light, moving to sheer sweetness. The unaccompanied chorus made a beautiful statement of utter majesty, joined by the orchestra, which swelled to a crescendo.

The tenor solo, joined by the bass, soprano and mezzo-soprano, was sublime, and we were introduced to four fine voices. Rhythms, melodies, drama, contrast – all built around the traditional funeral rite in Latin, explored emotions of sorrow, loss, forgiveness and redemption.

A quiet, major key closing of section 1 led to the strident, valkyrie-like, terrifying *Dies irae*, with pounding kettle and bass drums, then a single trumpet statement with answering trumpets positioned in the balconies, playing one single note, then blanching to chords, a call to judgment, in one of the loudest unaccompanied passages in musical history.

Agnus Dei, sung against flutes and featuring the mezzo-soprano, was gorgeous, followed by a dirge-like sequence underscored by the orchestra, and an a capella trio of soloists over shimmering strings, deep brasses and caroling flutes.

In the tenor solo, *Ingemisco*, Mr. Bernard particularly showed his power and emotional range. Soprano Valerie Bernhardt sang better and better as the work progressed, her high notes floating above, crystalline. Mezzo-soprano Ann McMahan Quintero sang affectingly in the book of the dead. Bass Kevin Deas was a robust, dramatic standout. The quartet in this work deserves a place in the musical hierarchy next to the composer's famed sextet from “Rigoletto.”

Fugal techniques in the *Sanctus* were arresting, and the section was played and sung magnificently by the chorus.

The work is so organic, with flow between orchestra, soloists and chorus so intricate, that one wonders how the conductor followed the demands and directions of the score, but he is a remarkable musical explorer.

Verdi, the great composer of opera, well understood the power of narrative, the communication between characters (in this work, the soloists) against a larger musical background to create dramatic context, as in the *Lacrimosa*, a duet reworked from his opera "Don Carlos."

The use of pounding kettledrums in the *Dies irae*, repeated throughout the work, was only equaled by the composer's dramatic caesuras throughout. By far the most emotionally engaging and riveting of the major requiems, this work is a towering achievement, brought to brilliant realization in this performance.

Paul Mueller conducted the nearly two-hour-long work with subtlety and absolute musical command, looking completely spent at the concert's quiet, *Libera me* closing, in which the soprano soloist begs, "Deliver me, Lord, from eternal death.... when you will come to judge the world by fire."

Mueller, chorus, and the excellent orchestra were rewarded with a standing ovation, cries of "bravo," whoops, whistles and many curtain calls for a superlative performance.

For information on upcoming Greenwich Choral Society performances, visit www.GreenwichChoralSociety.org.

Linda Phillips, a two-time Pulitzer Prize nominee for her music review column in the Greenwich Citizen and her book To the Highest Bidder, 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.