

MUSIC REVIEW

Choral Society rings in the Holiday Season

by Linda Phillips

Beginning its 90th season with a very English concert, The Greenwich Choral Society once again transported its audience with candles and bells to an ethereal Christmas realm to open its highly anticipated seasonal concert.

Conductor Paul Mueller always creates intriguing programming, and in selecting Benjamin Britten's "Saint Nicolas Cantata" over the more traditional "Ceremony of Carols," he managed to conduct the Choral Society, the orchestra, a transcendent tenor soloist, a meltingly lovely soprano soloist, a children's choir, astonishing boy soloists, and the entire audience simultaneously — no mean musical feat!



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With hand bells, then quietly singing "Dormi Jesu" by Edmund Rubbra, the chorus entered the darkened church and encircled the audience, casting its traditional musical spell before mounting the risers in the magnificent Christ Church apse.

"In Praise of Mary" by Geoffrey Bush opened with dramatic kettledrums and whirring double basses, creating portentous drama. The organ sounded, then the chorus entered with "Hail Mary," as the saint entered and dawn broke, the music moving to high crescendo, throbbing with pathos. A second section, consonant and dissonant simultaneously, was gilded by the beautiful, sweet voice of soprano Lianne Coble, with male voices joining, and then the entire chorus singing "Gloria in Excelsis Deo" before the poignant ending. The third section was in lilting triple meter with a constant throbbing in the orchestra.

The organ began the escapade of the fourth section with a dramatic choral statement, Coble singing with it against the insistent beat of the drums. Informed by climbing modulations, the fifth section was in a sad minor key that built momentum, rising in volume against pizzicato strings, leading to the closing sixth section, with sopranos and tenors singing "Alleluia." This work contains gorgeous harmonies and scoring and was performed movingly by soloist and chorus.

The audience rose and joined in singing "The First Nowell."

The life of St. Nicolas is divided into chapters and parables by composer Britten, the most shocking of which is "Nicolas and the Pickled Boys," based on a vision of murdered boys who were to be eaten by unsuspecting guests.

A precursor of the Santa Claus legend as well as a Saint, Nicolas was sung by powerful tenor David Vanderwal after the chorus in the introduction called the inspirational man forth. One thought throughout of Pope Francis and the late Nelson Mandela as current figures of Nicolas-like stature.

The "Birth of Nicolas" was announced by pizzicato cellos and violins, leading to a triple metre song and an angelic boy soprano, 7-year-old Ty Green. High, light music sang against the cracking of sticks and mad percussion as Vanderwal closed with a narrative. Nicolas Devotes Himself to God then in dirge-like serious tones in a recitativo by the tenor, then "He Journeys to Palestine," this music full of the movement of the roiling, angry sea. There was high drama as the St. Cecilia Choir of Girls chimed in.

Four hands in the piano led to the choir turning heavenly, against a violin motif. The chorus narrated as Nicolas adjured God in Vanderwal's glorious voice.

"Nicolas Comes to Myra" and is "Chosen Bishop" of, and the audience was invited to stand and sing a Christian doxology. "Nicolas From Prison" where, angered, he sang of persecution.

In "Nicolas and The Pickled Boys," the music and narrative were an insistent march, dramatic in its pain and despair, with Nicolas pleading. The music then moved to reflect on Nicolas' piety and his works, as the chorus opens in a lyrical passage, again in triple metre. The interplay between male and female voices was lovely and the percussion was stirring in

an orchestral interlude.

Vandewal's magnificent voice rang with passion again in the concluding Death of Nicolas, as the audience again rose and sang a hymn.

John Rutter's lilting "A Candlelight Carol" followed, then "I Sing of a Maiden," by Patrick Hadley, utilizing the children's choir with strings that faded softly. The rousing "Adeste Fidelis" was sung by audience and all voices, followed by a jazzy, spiritual version of "Go Tell It on the Mountain" which showed off the choir a capella, with a repeating motif in the male voices. We were called back into the Christmas realm with a fabulous arrangement of "We Wish You A Merry Christmas," to piano accompaniment.

What is beauty? The performances of the Greenwich Choral Society walks in it, like the night. A percussive concert, one in which the excellence abounded, and Hail Mary was easily transposed to Hail the Greenwich Choral Society, and its gifted conductor.

The next performance of the Greenwich Choral Society will be held on Saturday, March 8, 2014 with a performance of Gioachino Rossini's "Petite Messe Solennelle." For tickets and information, visit www.greenwichchoral-society.org

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