

Greenwich Choral Society closes season with Mozart

Jeffrey Johnson, May 6, 2013

GREENWICH -- When many people think of the Mozart Requiem, scenes from the close of the movie "Amadeus" come to mind. While the movie is compelling and beautiful in many ways, the real story of how the music for the Requiem came about, and how it came down to us, is much more complicated than the movie made it appear.

It is true that Mozart died at age 35 before completing this work. It was completed by Franz Xaver Süssmayr, who was a young composer, copyist and assistant to Mozart, so the Mozart family could receive money from the commission.

The exact state of completion at the time of Mozart's death and the amount of information given by Mozart to Süssmayr remain matters of debate, but for many years the Süssmayr completion of the Requiem was the only performance option. But many alternative completions have been developed and published over the last 40 years and several of them give us additional insights into the work.

The Greenwich Choral Society, conducted by their music director Paul F. Mueller in the Christ Church in Greenwich, closed its season with a performance of the Robert D. Levin completion of the Mozart Requiem. Levin's completion simplified many orchestral textures, corrected the key of one fugue, and most importantly added an "Amen fugue" based on a sketch by Mozart discovered in the 1960s.

Mueller sought an old-school big choral sound, and the GCS responded. The sound during the "Rex tremendae" filled Christ Church to the rafters. The contrast between this big sound in the "Confutatis maladictis" and the sweet and ethereal vocal colors of the "Voca me" was dramatic. The ensemble brought a dance-like freshness to six-bar phrases of the "Amen Fugue." The soloists in this performance included soprano Kristen Plumley, mezzo soprano Holly Sorensen, tenor Dann Coakwell, and bass Damian Savarino. Savarino took command with his entrance in the "Tuba mirum," creating a brass-like resonance in his voice. Coakwell brought an operatic drama to his lines and blended nicely into ensembles. Plumley had a rich sound but her voice had the tendency to become lost in thicker textures. Sorensen had a colorful sound and impressive legato phrasing.

Mueller was able to segment the work nicely. He kept momentum flowing and led each section into the fugue that closed it -- which is an important distinguishing feature of the Levin completion.

The event opened with Felix Mendelssohn's Psalm Motet Op. 78 No.2 "Richte mich, Gott." This unaccompanied work for double choir was cleanly articulated by the GCS in mixed formation, and the juxtaposition of carefully defined structures and flowing, elegant lines was poignant.

To close the relatively brief first half of the program we heard "Three Brontë Songs" by Shafer Mahoney. Mahoney's music was charismatic and filled with relaxed confidence and tonal goals that were both clever and focused. The GCS presented the music with conviction, but occasionally blurred the delicate rhythms. The first movement, "This shall be thy lullaby," had a theme so catchy that I overheard two people humming it during intermission. The composer was present and the piece was well received.