

Greenwich Choral Society opens Season with first snowfall

By Jeffrey Johnson

CORRESPONDENT

Greenwich Time, Sunday, December 13, 2009

It had rained all day on December 5. But after hearing the Christmas concert given by the Greenwich Choral Society, the audience that left Christ Church Greenwich was greeted by the first snowfall of the season. This was a lucky audience.

They sat quietly, in a meditative mood, as the lights dimmed and the GCS began a processional, each member holding a candle, and several also rang hand bells in patterns that sounded like elaborate wind chimes. When the singers had encircled us they sang "O Nata Lux," the central movement from Morten Lauridsen's "Lux Aeterna." We were enveloped in that sound, with fading light coming through the church's stained glass.

The central work of this program was an 11-movement work commissioned by and written for the Greenwich Choral Society almost 30 years ago by significant American composer Stephen Paulus. The cantata "So Hallow'd is the Time," is built from Christmas texts from ten 16th century authors including John Donne, Robert Herrick and Shakespeare.

Like multi-colored Christmas lights, each movement is set in pure colors that contrast sharply with its surroundings. Baritone soloist Keith Harris intoned the opening prelude, from which the title of the work comes, in which an observation is made by Marcellus in the first scene of Shakespeare's "Hamlet." Harris has a powerfully narrative element in his singing that was perfect for this style.

The centerpiece of the work was a birth scene set in thick-knotted harmonies and thinking rhythms. It gave way to a most lovely music, set to the anonymous text "And I Shal Syng." Soprano soloist Tharanga Goonetilleke, who lit-up "Carmina Burana" with the GCS last season, continued to impress with her effortless musicianship. She was joined by treble soloist Eli Abbasi, who is in the seventh grade at Eastern Middle School in Riverside. Abbasi's intonation was perfect and he was an audience favorite. Tenor soloist Kirk Dougherty contributed throughout the evening with vibrant singing. The clarity of his diction and his ability to fill the church with sound made welcome each opportunity to hear his voice.

The work by Paulus was flanked on either side by the "Canticle of Mary,"

written by Libby Larsen, and "Seven Joys of Christmas" arranged by Kirke Mechem. Mechem's work was clever, and ended with celebration called "The Joys of Song." Set to the text "God bless the master of this house," it presented an array of simultaneous carols: as many as four at once!

After the Mechem, the program took a turn toward pops with "I Wonder as I Wander" by John Jacob Niles, "Betlehemu," sung in Yoruba as arranged by Wendell Whalum, "Jesus, Jesus, Rest Your Head," arranged by Barlow Bradford, and "Go Tell It on the Mountain," arranged by Stephen Barnett.

The design of the program was creative and effective; in between each of the major works the audience stood and sang a carol with the orchestra and chorus. Music director and conductor Paul F. Mueller once again brought together a collection of forces that is to be commended. This event dazzled with virtuosity and finely crafted musicianship, and yet it maintained the human warmth often associated with this season in which, as sung at the opening of the Paulus work, "The nights are wholesome"

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