

GCS and SSO make “heavenly” music together

Jeffrey Johnson

A successful performance of Beethoven's ninth symphony is an event worth remembering. It is a work that has come to represent the ideals of transcendence. The music presents substantial challenges to the orchestra, conductor and especially to the singers.

The [Greenwich Choral Society](#), prepared by their conductor, [Paul F. Mueller](#), joined the Stamford Symphony, conducted by their conductor and music director, [Eckart Preu](#), in a program that paired the ninth symphony with another major choral work that also gave insight into the metaphysical side of the human experience.

The first work on the program was the "Schicksalslied Op. 54 (Song of Destiny)" by Brahms. In this work, the realm of Gods was set in a transparent and serene E-flat major that was



Mezzo-soprano Teresa Buchholz

contrasted by restless and heavy music in C minor that represented the daily grind on Earth. The GCS and the SSO worked well together to resonate the opening "heavenly" music. The GCS produced characteristically rich colors in their choral sound. Their attention to details, such as the exact placement of consonants, made the text clearly audible.

The test for successful performance in this work is that it should produce a sense of strangeness. It ends with the music of the orchestral introduction in the key of the C major instead of Eb major, so it sounds the celestial image in the key that had become associated with human struggle. The chorus remained focused and seemed on the verge of singing even though the music required them to remain silent to the close of the work. Some choirs relax during this passage, but the

GCS showed us the added value of concentrated meditation. We were left with a wonderfully strange sense of the unresolved mixture intended by Brahms; elements of the divine and the earthly intermixed.

The style and attitude of the Schicksalslied was a perfect preparation for Beethoven's ninth symphony. But the length of the work, at only about 17 minutes, did make for a short first half of the program, and the audience seemed unsure that it was really time for an intermission so soon.

The featured work on the program was the great ninth symphony by Beethoven. [Michelle Trovato](#) joined the ensemble as soprano soloist and was also an emergency replacement for the scheduled soprano, who was ill. She joined mezzo-soprano [Teresa Buchholz](#), tenor

Christopher Pfund, and baritone [Daniel Cilli](#) for a program that gathered force and intensity as it proceeded and culminated in a thrilling conclusion.

Preu took quick, lively tempos. He took the trio of the scherzo in a super-fast Rossini-like reading of the tempo proportions, and took the third movement at a tempo that also moved swiftly but that still preserved, and maybe even helped to foster, the singing "cantabile" quality of the music.

Persistent problems with woodwind entrances and balances in the first movement disappeared in the second movement, and the playing warmed as it focused. The Greenwich Choral Society sang the music with a force and conviction that was winning.

The thrill of the ending was wonderful. So thrilling that the final section of the finale was encored and it worked the second time just as well as it did the first time. The evening ended with an ovation that was well deserved.

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