

Rossini performed with much fanfare

By Jeffrey Johnson

Gioachino Rossini redefined the world of Italian opera in the early 19th century. He wrote 39 operas by age 37, then retired and lived another 39 years, mostly in Paris, without writing another opera. He spent a glorious retirement learning to cook and making appearances at the most fashionable events and parties in town. He also spent considerable time informing other composers what was wrong with their music. He knew Donizetti, Berlioz and especially Wagner.

But Rossini's retirement did produce some glorious music, including the "Petite Messe Solennelle" written by the composer in 1863 at the age of 71. The Greenwich Choral Society, conducted by its music director Paul F. Mueller in Christ Church in Greenwich, undertook an illuminating performance of the first version of this great work.

Scored for two pianos and harmonium, this version can sound transparent. Pianists James D. Wetzel and Steven Graff and organist Jonathan Ryan were an effective ensemble, and they maintained the clarity and buoyancy of sound that this music requires.

"Petite Messe Solennelle" is a work of parallelisms, refrains and ritualistic tonality. The Greenwich Choral Society launched the music with a Kyrie in brisk tempo and with an emphatic and well-focused "K" sound that energized the texture. There are several choral fanfares throughout the work, like the opening statement of the "Gloria in excelsis." The GCS found rich colors and convincing sound in these loud, celebratory passages. They were particularly impressive in the massive and climactic cadence moments before the close of the Credo, which is a passage that can easily derail during a live performance. They produced a warm and sweet sound in the unaccompanied Sanctus, and an unforgettably consol-



Keelin Daly/Staff photographer

Music Director Paul F. Mueller, above, led the Greenwich Choral Society through an illuminating performance of Rossini's glorious "Petite Messe Solennelle."

Pianists James D. Wetzel and Steven Graff and organist Jonathan Ryan ... maintained the clarity and buoyancy of sound that this music requires.

ing, yet heart-broken texture during the final *Agnus Dei*.

The soloists, soprano Kerri Marcinko, *mezzo* soprano Kimberly Sogioka, tenor Youngchul Park and bass Darnian Savarino, were not only individually memorable, but they created lovely and detailed ensembles.

There are two critical moments in this work that were given to the soprano soloist, the "Crucifixus" and a setting of "O salutaris hostia" added to the standard Mass text by Rossini. Marcinko was able to inhabit the operatic cloister that is suggested by these movements. She made the unexpected seem inevitable. Sogioka had rainbow colors, but also had the power to be heard within an ensemble. Park had baritonal qualities in his voice that

were welcome in this work. Savarino shook the rafters with his resonant low pitches and put the "Quoniam tu solus sanctus" onto our playlists.

The event opened with three hors d'oeuvres from the operatic repertoire, each of which invoked spiritual images of journeys or processions: "Priere" from Rossini's opera "Moïse et Pharaon," the famous "Salve Regina" from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, by Mascagni, with its freakishly high B to close, and "Va Pensiero" from *Nabucco*, by Verdi.

These opening selections helped us to hear the "Petite Messe Solennelle" as a work that was not like a religious episode from within an opera. The GCS brought out its sincerity and revealed the gentle humor and lovely surprises in this work of devotion.