

## Greenwich Choral Society cooks up tasty French fare

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By Jeffrey Johnson, Correspondent

The Greenwich Choral Society, led by music director and conductor Paul F. Mueller, explored a dazzling array of Romantic and 20<sup>th</sup> century French music in a recent program at Christ Church in Greenwich.

The event had the feel of a multi-course meal and it opened with two musical appetizers, the “Sanctus” from the Requiem by Gabriel Fauré, and “Ubi Caritas” from the Four Motets on Gregorian Themes by Maurice Duruflé.

The Fauré greeted us gently and established the warm sound that is associated with the Greenwich Choral Society. The Duruflé was given with great sensitivity to the way that modal frictions could develop and release within shifting textures.

Next we were treated to two works by Francis Poulenc, the “Litanies à la Vierge Noire” and the “Salve Regina.” The “Litanies” are scored for treble voices, and the women of the GCS allowed the chant lines around which the work centers to glide and grow. At one point the lines transformed into alarms that sounded like trumpets before finding their way back into the world of chanting.

At the midpoint of the first half of the program, harpist Rita Costanzi lit up the church with the “Vers la Source dans le Bois (Toward the Spring in the Woods),” by Marcel Tournier. Costanzi drew our attention toward the instrument from silence itself, and developed this harp solo into music of fluidity.

Costanzi’s harp solo was an effective marker, and the “Ave Verum Corpus,” by Fauré, which featured the tenors and basses alone – balancing the “Litanies” that we heard earlier in the program.

The “Sanctus” from the Mass for unaccompanied double choir by Frank Martin was uneven. The first section was insecure despite the use of a rehearsal piano, but the rhythmically driven central section worked quite well. The high tenor parts near the close were gorgeous, and the work built to an effective closing.

The first half of the program closed with a peaceful performance of the “Tantum Ergo,” by Charles-Marie Widor.

After intermission, we heard the “Cantique de Jean Racine,” by Fauré. This music explores lines that fall at contrasting rates of speed, and these lines were balanced with great skill by the ensemble.

Organist James Kennerley, who supported the chorus with great musicianship throughout the event, played the “Carillon de Westminster,” by Louis Vierne. This work, which incorporates the popular eight-note chiming tune we associate with grandfather clocks, was performed by Kennerley with great skill and musicality.

Next, we heard the work which was the main course of this musical meal – the “Messe Solennelle,” by Vierne. This was music seeking peacefulness. Mueller found many ways to articulate this complex pathway from conflict and unrest through celebration and dancing toward revelation. Most noteworthy was the feel he created in the “Sanctus,” where jazzy syncopated rhythms framed a central section that was forceful and declamatory. A long road led to the music of the “Agnus Dei,” which the GCS presented with elegant motion and deeply felt emotion.

The event closed with the rhythmically charged “Laudate Dominum,” by Marcel Dupré. This music left us with a reminder of the humor and lightness of which this ensemble is capable; the perfect dessert for a meal shared among friends.