

Greenwich Choral Society concert a delight for the ear

By Jerome R. Schulster, Special Correspondent

The Greenwich Choral Society concluded its 2007-2008 season last Sunday afternoon at the Norwalk Concert Hall with "Promise," a broad selection of all-American choral compositions. It was the state-side performance of a program that will cross the ocean with the Society this July for appearances in Paris and in Vienne, France, the newly proclaimed sister city to Greenwich.

The concert presented a potpourri of musical styles. The program began with more formally religious selections: Randall Thompson's "Alleluia" and Morten Lauridsen's "Lux Aeterna." The former demonstrated the Greenwich Choral Society's signature sonorities, shaped by the master hand of Paul F. Mueller, music director and conductor.

"Lux Aeterna," the longest piece in the concert, began and ended with the high, ethereal strings, fitting the image of eternal light as the work's thematic organization. Though premiered in 1997, "Lux Aeterna" has a musical idiom that is remarkably accessible. Its fine movements draw from sacred texts in Latin, including the traditional Requiem Mass, the Te Deum and others. The moods of the five movements vary from the contemplative and introspective of the first to the more uplifting and extraverted of the fourth. The Agnus Dei, the final movement, was comforting and peaceful. Mueller led the Greenwich Choral Society Orchestra, whose concertmaster is Maria Conti, and the chorus through all of the complexities of Lauridsen's fascinating score. Jessica Elkhatib, principal cellist in the orchestra, provided a soulful accompaniment during an early movement.

The second half of the concert was devoted to smaller scale works, some spiritual, but some about the simple life in America in a bygone era. Connecticut son, Charles Ives, arguably one of the more interesting composers in our musical past, set many songs in addition to his symphonies and tone poems. "Serenity," performed here, is a striking example of his art. The high sustained strings and complex harmonies throughout, both in chorus and in orchestra, created a sense of peace and stillness. It was a unique moment in the concert.

Leonard Bernstein composed three songs in 1955 for Lillian Hellman's "The Lark," an adaptation of Jean Anouilh's play about Joan of Arc. Bernstein captured the feel of medieval France in the first, the "Spring Song." The chorus was accompanied by several members clapping rhythmically. The second, titled "Court Song," was in a more familiar idiom, at times betraying a thematic relationship to the opening chorus of Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana." The third played with the syllables of Joan's name.

Five of Aaron Copeland's Old American Songs were performed in the Fine/Wilding-White transcriptions for chorus. The familiar "Simple Gifts" was among these, sung beautifully by the chorus. Soloist Rod Gomez, a baritone, sang with a pleasing stage presence, jaunty in "The Boatmen's Dance," and especially charming in the nonsensical "I Bought Me a Cat." Gomez, the chorus and the orchestra alternated the sounds of the various animals purchased, each time running backwards through the list. Broad smiles beamed throughout Norwalk's Concert Hall.

The concert concluded with "Three Folk Hymn Settings" by Alice Parker. The chorus was simply splendid on these.

Chorus and orchestra performed the perfect encore to a program that will travel to France in July: a rousing "La Marseillaise" and the good ole "Star Spangled Banner," as well as a moving rendition of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands."

In short, it was a totally pleasing afternoon of fine music. Bon voyage et bon chance to the Greenwich Choral Society!