

Publication: *The East Hampton Press & The Southampton Press*

Choral Society ushers in the holiday season, and spirit

By Lee Davis

Dec 16, 08 3:13 PM

Not to fear. The holiday season has arrived, as it always does locally, with the annual Christmas concert of the Choral Society of the Hamptons, held last Sunday at the Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church.

The faultless acoustics of the church rang with this treasurable musical organization's flawless, warm and sensitive performance, under the baton of conductor Mark Mangini. As usual, Mr. Mangini assembled a fine chamber orchestra and four superior soloists to present Mozart and Haydn as they should be presented—pure, straightforward, and glowing in the many gorgeous melodies contained in the three balanced choices.

There is always a sense, under the direction of Mr. Mangini, that the Choral Society is having a happy time gathered together and performing with excellent artistry. The entrances this time were crisp and clean, the dynamics under clear and effective control.

Mr. Mangini chose the short and decisive Regina Coeli of Mozart to open the program. Bright and brittle and flowing, with lovely orchestral interludes, this lively prayer to the Virgin Mary was an appropriate curtain raiser.

The quartette of soloists—Sasha Leinster, soprano, Suzanne Schwing, mezzo soprano, Gabriel Gargari, tenor, and Neil Netherly, baritone—offered gentle contrast to the more full bodied choral passages, delivered with impeccable taste and musicality.

Poor, prolific Joseph Haydn. Not satisfied with dashing off 104 symphonies, he spent part of his later life writing 6 masses, each of them a gem. The first of these is the *Missa Sancti Bernardi von Offida*, knicknamed *Heilignesse* because the Austrian hymn "Heilig, Heilig" is hidden within the alto and tenor parts of the opening of the Sanctus section.

The entire mass is delightfully and identifiably Haydn, from the busy figures in the orchestra to the sustained, rich sonority of much of the choral work. On Sunday, it was a burst of elegant sound following the more compact and gentle Mozart, and the entire work was full of contrast and constantly changing interest in its interplay between chorus and orchestra.

The Sanctus, with its hymnlike opening, eventually dissolved into a jolly sextet (with the quartet joined by two chorus members unfortunately not identified in the program). The relationship between singers and orchestra was particularly inventive and interesting—the soprano buoyed by a woodwind obbligato, cellos and basses supporting the male voices.

From there, Haydn utilized a panoply of musical forms, fugues, respectful hymns, and more—all of it gloriously and impeccably performed.

The major portion of the program concluded with Mozart's *Laudate Dominum* from his *Vesperae Solemnes de Confessore*. It's a sublime and melodious composition to rank with the slow movements of some of his concertos. Gorgeous, with unexpected turns of melody, it was elegantly introduced by soprano Sasha Leinster, who was quietly and beautifully joined by the chorus until the two groups fused into a breathtaking, quiet conclusion.

Once again, maestro Mangini unerringly chose a balanced program that ended, as it does every year, with the audience joining in the singing of three traditional Christmas carols, while the sopranos soared heavenward with their sonorous descants.

All in all, a richly satisfying program that got the holidays off to a rich and happy start.