

Opinion

## A Triumphant and Joyous Concert

By Daniel Koontz

(12/17/2008)

The Choral Society of the Hamptons annual winter concert was a loud and festive occasion this year. Not only did we have all of the strong choral voices of our friends and neighbors, but we also had four fine



Durell Godfrey Photos

The Choral Society of the Hamptons winter concert, under the direction of Mark Mangini, delivered a festive and thrilling performance at the Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church on Sunday.

vocal soloists, an orchestra with trumpets and percussion, and, at the end, a pipe organ, all under the energetic direction of Mark Mangini, the society's music director.

On Sunday, the historic Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church once again rang with the sound of some great choral singing, followed by an even more thunderous Christmas carol sing-a-long. The program, though it did not feature the traditional holiday musical fare, offered ample good cheer in the spirit of the season.

Mozart's "Regina Coeli," or "Queen of Heaven," was an appropriately regal setting of this prayer to Mary, the mother of God. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who heard occasional echoes of Handel's "Hallelujah" in this piece, but this is apparently just a coincidence, as Mozart wasn't familiar with Handel's oratorio when he wrote this piece. After a strong, fanfare opening featuring the entire chorus, the quartet of soloists presented a quieter but still majestic sound. Mr. Mangini and the Choral Society paid careful attention to dynamics throughout the piece, bringing a thrilling crescendo to the repeated "resurrexit" passages.

The centerpiece of the concert was the "Missa St. Bernardi von Offida," one of a series of Masses Franz Joseph Haydn wrote toward the end of his life. Christmas is a celebration of God coming to live among his people, and this very festive and dancelike setting of the Mass seems to join in that celebration of life on earth. The opening kyrie sounded triumphant and joyous, banishing the solemnity composers often bring to this call for heaven's mercy. The chorus provided the large sound that this music calls for, but showed nice control in the occasional quieter moments. In the even more spirited "Gloria in Excelsis Deo," the sopranos got to show off some of their highest notes to dazzling effect.

The more subdued “Gratias agimus tibi” featured the solo quartet, but Haydn soon made a surprising shift into a lively triple-meter as the chorus sang the “Domine deus.” The dense, contrapuntal “Quoniam tu solus sanctus” was very clear and graceful.

For the “Et incarnatus est,” Suzanne Nicoletti, a chorus soprano,



A solo quartet presented Mozart’s “Regina Coeli” at the Choral Society of the Hamptons winter concert.

joined the soprano and mezzo of the solo quartet, Sasha Leinster and Suzanne Schwing, in a gradually unfolding trio, while Paul Melnyk, a chorus bass, joined the tenor and bass soloists in the dramatic

“Crucifixus.” These

local talents worked seamlessly with the soloists, creating a balanced blend and wonderful clarity.

In fact, the only spot where any of the performers seemed to lose their footing was in the tricky “Benedictus,” where entrances were at times a little off and intonation suffered in the orchestra. The closing “Sanctus” initially offered some more serious tones, but Haydn was soon back to his usual cheerfulness in the “Dona nobis pacem,” which was conspicuously playful and rhythmic.

Hearing this piece for the first time, I was struck by the sense of earthly pleasure Haydn brings to the sacred text of the Mass. I don’t know if Mr. Mangini chose to perform this piece at Christmas to highlight the connection between Jesus’s coming and human joy, but that’s what it underscored for me. I applaud his interesting, innovative programming choice.

The final performance on the program was Mozart’s “Laudate Dominum,” a gentle and beautiful setting of this prayer of praise. Ms. Leinster maintained a gorgeous, sustained sound, and was joined by the warmth and richness of the chorus in the “Gloria Patri.”

As is the custom at the Choral Society’s winter concert, all were invited to join in on three Christmas carols. As the audience sang the melodies, the pipe organ and orchestra supported the singing and the chorus added flourishes and descants, allowing those of us who were not onstage to feel a part of this community celebration. Young and old were uplifted by singing these familiar tunes, and I’m sure they, like me, were singing them for a good while afterward.

Daniel W. Koontz is a professor of music at Stony Brook Southampton and is the music director at Christ Episcopal Church in Sag Harbor.