

Walt Whitman's Modernism and Populism

Harmonium Choral Society, Anne Matlack (conductor).

Leslie Adler (soprano), Mark Hewitt (baritone), John Lamb (bass).

Vaughan Williams: *Dona Nobis Pacem*; Schuman: *Carols of Death*; Mark Andrew Miller: *Song of the Open Road* (premiere).

Church of the Redeemer, Morristown.

By Paul M. Somers

The Harmonium Choral Society presented a theme concert with much to consider. Each of the three works used poetry by Walt Whitman, whose muse still resonates as inclusively modern and American after all these years. And each work, when placed in our contemporary historical moment speaks about war and our response to it. The final work seemed to connect with the idealistic view of the future which we find in the younger members of classical music audiences now becoming less enamored of the old classics and craving new philosophical ideas.

To understand the thrust of the concert let me begin at the beginning.

Ralph Vaughn Williams' still touching, even haunting *Dona nobis pacem*, which mixes the Latin Mass, Whitman selections, and Biblical scripture is a voice of peace in the face of war. In its own way it is a precursor to the greatest piece of 20th century choral literature, Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, which also mixes poetry and Latin liturgy.

Composed in five continuous movements — the fifth often, as in this instance, divided in two — it can be unwieldy in the hands of the less experienced. But Anne Matlack is a past master at pacing and finding the true climax of such a work. Her musicality in this case was informed by her moral sensibility. "Every time we sing this, it counts for peace," she said in a promotional email, and her emotional connection to the work could be heard in the communicative phrasing.

Yet it was not all emotion. There was the balance of intellect, as there should be. Rhythms and therefore diction were precise, driving the piece forward cleanly. Choral ensemble was taut.

Matlack, like so many other choral conductors, chooses her soloists from within the chorus. Because of the high reputation of the Harmonium Choral Society, some very fine singers are available. Soprano Leslie Adler sang with a voice which, probably adjusted to match the subject matter, touchingly reminded one of a boy-soprano without actually being one. Both baritone Mark Hewitt and bass John Lamb have resonant voices with secure pitch and well controlled attacks and releases. All three were eminently musical.

William Schuman's *Carols of Death* was sung by the Chamber Singers. Its language uses dissonance in the composer's distinctive and effective manner. It is not easy to

produce in an *a cappella* piece. These singers, however, produced as good a performance as one can imagine: secure, in tune, well nuanced, and committed. Especially effective were the pianissimos where intonation can so often falter. In short, they were utterly professional.

Resignation and acceptance of death make for emotionally difficult music to hear in these times. But it was a most appropriate choice to hold up the consequences of war in an artistic setting.

After looking war and death in the face, the unbounded optimism of Mark Andrew Miller's setting of Whitman's *Song of the Open Road* presented a vision of the future which finds a path other than war. The music is eclectic in the best sense of the word. One hears folk-like tunes (a melody reminiscent of Shenandoah is one of the main themes), and one hears the broad expanses of an epic western film. More urban suggestions rise from his jazzy syncopations, and the sounds of Protestant hymnody and African-American gospel surface on occasion. It is what one would expect, indeed, hope for were there a modern WPA composer program. It is people's music: inviting, easily understood, yet not simplistic.

For all its populism, it is well made. Themes recur, motives have meaning and tie the twenty-three minute work together so the music never becomes episodic on the one hand, nor on the other hand does it sprawl or meander. There is always a long range goal, places in the score where the music tells us we have finally arrived.

Miller handles the chamber orchestra well as it supports but never overwhelms the singers. Yet at those climactic points the effect is heightened by the power of the instruments. He showed particular skill in using the horn and trumpet registers to fine effect.

Song of the Open Road is a work which is not as technically challenging as the earlier two pieces in the concert, though it is not dimwittedly easy. It is possible that the Harmonium forces are just so good that they never sounded as if they were hard pressed for even one second. Yet that ease is part of the effectiveness of the piece, and perhaps part of a wider future for it. It captures the populist optimism of Whitman's text by being of the same type.

"Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms, Strong and content I travel the open road," says Whitman in the second stanza of his poem.

And it is that sense of openness and vastness which Miller evokes and which thrilled the audience. Long applause and a standing ovation greeted the composer, who had been at the piano as part of the instrumental ensemble.

March 2, 2008