

IV. History and Culture

'Christmas: Time for the Good'

Schiller Institute NYC Chorus Uplifts in New York Concert

by Philip Ulanowsky

Dec. 16—In a time of war such as this, what role can music play in charting a better course? An audience of around 100, of all ages and backgrounds, were offered a substantive and challenging answer in word and music Dec. 14, at the Good Shepherd-Faith Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. It was titled, “Christmas:

sassinations of prominent, promising American leaders, he used a presentation by New York’s U.S. Representative Adam Clayton Powell (1908–1972) to challenge individuals to act. Powell had asked, “What’s in your hand?” Moses had just a stick, but led his people to safety; Christ on the cross had nails, but his short



Schiller Institute NYC Chorus

The Schiller Institute NYC Chorus, under the baton of Megan Dobrodt, presented “Christmas: Time for the Good,” at the Good Shepherd–Faith Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. Compositions included Handel, Bach, Negro Spirituals, and traditional Christmas carols.

Time for the Good.”

Schiller Institute leader Dennis Speed introduced the evening’s program with a powerful admonition that “we have to change” if we are to find a way out of the horrors into which the world has descended. Reaching back through decades of history to the 1960s serial as-

life divided the history of civilization, B.C. from A.D. In our hands tonight, said Speed, we have music. How will we use it?

The program, like that of other Schiller Institute choral concerts, encompassed music from Handel and Bach to Negro Spirituals, and on this occasion included several

traditional Christmas carols. Because the [chorus](#), founded in 2014 by Diane Sare, now a candidate for the U.S. Senate from New York, approaches all its selections not as styles but as examples of a Classical principle in art for uplifting its audience, the variety of pieces never suffers from any sense of “something for everyone” entertainment. Instead, the works complement through common purpose and combine to create a unity of effect. The chorus’s adherence to the tuning of A at 432 Hz tuning at which voices are freed from the strain of today’s prevalent, arbitrary higher ones (440 Hz and well above), and instruments sing with improved warmth and transparency, further enhances its quality.

A live performance cannot be properly reviewed from an online stream, as this author is obliged to do here; the ambiance in the hall, and subtleties and nuances heard in the hall’s acoustic environment do not carry through electronic translation. That said, however, this concert included deeply engaging moments that must have been all the more extraordinary in person. The weak spot on this occasion was an instrumental ensemble of only a few individuals, which could hardly replace a small orchestra, particularly in the large



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Adhering to the tuning of A at 432 Hz throughout, the chosen works combined to create a unity of effect through a common purpose: to uplift the audience.

choral pieces. But here again, many in the audience remarked on how effectively the five instruments functioned—keyboard (harpsichord, organ, piano), two violins, double bass, and for the Bach, trumpet.

Comfort Ye

Tenor Everett Suttle opened the musical program with the arias *Comfort Ye, My People* and *Every Valley Shall Be Exalted*, the first of three selections from Handel’s *Messiah* conducted by Megan Dobrodt, who is President of the Schiller Institute U.S.A. The text comes from the Old Testament’s book of Isaiah, in which God speaks to his people with a hopeful message. Even those familiar with performances of this setting would have been gripped by Suttle’s rendition as soon as he began singing. His ability to sing high passages with delicacy and nuance, combined with his thoughtful freedom in phrasing, recalls singers from a century



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Soprano Michelle Erin (left) and former Metropolitan alto Linda Childs sing Gesù Bambino, an Italian Christmas carol.



Schiller Institute NYC Chorus

Tenor Everett Suttle opened with two arias from Handel's *Messiah*, "Comfort Ye, My People," and "Every Valley Shall Be Exalted." He later returned to sing Niles' haunting folk hymn, "I Wonder as I Wander," and then a rendition of "Oh, Lord, Shout with Joy."

ago who sang with an intimacy too rarely heard today.

Linda Childs, whose rich alto voice has graced the Metropolitan Opera, followed with *Oh Thou that Bringeth Good Tidings to Zion*, then succeeded by *Rejoice*, joyously delivered by soprano Michelle Erin. Ms. Erin also engages chorus members in discovering the *bel canto* potentials of their voice as part of the chorus's development program.

Handel was followed by a lively choral arrangement of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, conducted by Diane Sare, a juxtaposition that in other hands might have seemed out of place. Under her direction, the spirituals always retain the nobility of spirit they share with great Classical pieces of earlier centuries, something which inevitably comes as a revelation to many audiences.

Mr. Suttle returned to sing John Jacob Niles's haunting folk hymn *I Wonder as I Wander*; once again imbuing melody and words with a thoughtfulness and depth of phrasing that lent this familiar song a personal intimacy with his audience that echoed the opening remarks of Mr. Speed. In a surprise departure from the program, Suttle then announced his desire to dedicate a song to Dennis and Lynne Speed, whose 50th wedding anniversary is approaching, and to Grammy Award winner Chapman Roberts, who was in the audience. He sang the lovely *Scarlet Ribbons* (Danzig/Segal) unaccompanied.

Making Music Together

Suttle's ebullient rendition of *Oh, Lord, Shout with Joy* was accompanied, as in *I Wonder*, by Dura Jun, and

here we must say something about her outstanding artistry. Accompanying a singer in music of the quality of this evening's has nothing to do with providing a "background." Done well, it involves an intense collaboration between the two artists at every moment, so that complete complementarity and unity of effect embraces the audience. This is already challenging enough with a proper piano, but we heard it from Ms. Jun's astonishing ability to bend the sounds of an electronic keyboard (necessitated here by the lower tuning) to her musical will. This she did throughout the evening in a range of selections with widely different demands.

Two traditional carols sung by the full chorus *a cappella* allowed the audience to hear one reason for this chorus's growing reputation. From the beginning, the chorus has invited anyone to join and holds no auditions. Most, if not all its members, representing a wide range of ages, come from other backgrounds and professions. For any such assembly, the quality of sound and musicianship is remarkable.

Two duets—the ethereal *Panis Angelicus* (Franck), and *Gesù Bambino*—sung by Ms. Erin with Duqingna, and Ms. Childs, respectively, followed.

Mrs. Dobrodt returned to the podium to conclude the concert with the *Sanctus, Benedictus, Agnus Dei*, and *Dona Nobis Pacem* (Grant Us Peace) from Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, a work whose challenges and complexities are demanding for any chorus. Attendees reportedly commented widely on the beauty of the final selection. Surely, its message is today an anthem around the world, while it also asks implicitly, what is in our hands?

The Schiller Institute NYC Chorus has performed Mozart's *Requiem* with more than 100 singers from all over NYC and the Eastern Seaboard. It has presented a series of concerts for peace in the recent months, including one on August 6, the anniversary of the 1945 Hiroshima bombing, following which its ranks have swelled significantly. We can only hope it will continue to draw from younger generations for whom its mission and optimism will be a welcome alternative to the pessimism around them.