

West Shore Chorale at St. John's Cathedral (Mar. 1)

by David Kulma



The West Shore Chorale and its longtime music director John Drotleff focused on psalms settings by Mozart and Bernstein together with a work by David Conte for its performance on the Helen D. Schubert Concert Series at The Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist on Friday, March 1.

Mozart's *Vesperae solennes de Confessore*, K. 339 from 1780 sets the six psalms of the Catholic Vespers service for chorus and strings. Drotleff extracted a lovely three-movement selection that began with "Dixit Dominus." Filling the large, booming cathedral, this celebratory music showed off the 80-plus member chorus's precise and fluent Latin diction. The slowly unfurling "Laudate

Dominum" featured soprano and chorale member Debra Chelko, who handled Mozart's long phrases with great care. Finishing with "Laudate Pueri," Drotleff and his forces handled its dark fugue with clarity and a good, forward-moving tempo. While the freelance strings sounded under-rehearsed, the Chorale's sheer power was overwhelming.

David Conte's *September Sun* from 2002 stunningly commemorates September 11, 2001. The first and last movements are the same gorgeous meditation for strings alone, while the two inner ones set an acrostic poem by Conte's late collaborator John Stirling Walker. The second, "O Sun," moves the meditation to unaccompanied choir, while the third, "In New York," depicts the bustle of life in the city. Conte crafted a wonderful arc

that showed off the West Shore Chorale's skills in creating sweeping dynamic contrasts as emotions bubbled up and dissipated. Drotleff ably shaped this beautiful music in what was likely the Ohio premiere. If it's not already, *September Sun* should be a standard repertoire item for choruses.

Bernstein's well-loved *Chichester Psalms* (1964) ended the program in its smaller ensemble accompaniment for harp (Jody Guinn), percussion (Andrew Pongracz), and organ — here replaced by piano (Maria Voljin). The trio of instrumentalists was excellent, but the booming acoustics played havoc with Bernstein's fast, off-kilter sacred dances, making the Hebrew unintelligible but the snare drumming absolutely clear. On the other hand, the slow music came off beautifully, especially the unaffected melody for boy soprano sung by Andrew Swislocki and later taken up by the chorale's women in the second movement.

Drotleff and his West Shore Chorale made joyful noises with startling precision on Friday evening. Different acoustics and another instrumental rehearsal or two would have shown them off even better.

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