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Many rewards in Choral Society's presentation of 'Requiem'

By Lee Davis

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The traditional summer concert of the Choral Society of the Hamptons is more often than not a comparatively lighthearted event.

But this year, conductor Mark Mangini and his local minions joined with the Greenwich Village singers and the South Fork Chamber Orchestra to present an extravaganza last Saturday consisting of the music of Lukas Foss and Johannes Brahms, bookended by a fund-raising pre-concert dinner and post-concert reception.

The giant, overflow crowd that responded to all of this taxed the capabilities of the Old Whalers' Church air conditioning system, but the offsetting rewards were mighty and many. The massed choruses, wrapped around the audience in the balconies and behind the orchestra, were gorgeous and thrilling. The two soloists, soprano Darynn Zimmer and baritone Ross Benoliel, sang gloriously. The South Fork Chamber Orchestra, a local gem, never sounded better, and maestro Mangini towered over the proceedings with sensitive and superhuman skill and calm.

The concert opened with two selections from Lukas Foss's "Song of Songs," sung with rich and ringing tones by soprano Darynn Zimmer.

The two flowing compositions are abundant in melody—the soprano floating like a flower in a pond above a contrapuntal instrumental accompaniment. The first, "Awake, O North Wind," ends on a joyous note; the second, "Set Me as a Seal," is more solemn, but equally as compelling. Both were performed beautifully and knowledgeably.

After these two pieces, Mr. Foss's widow, Cornelia, delivered a charming capturing of her husband's devotion to his residence on the East End, and this was followed by Brahms's "Nanie," a musical setting of Frederick von Schiller's poem, written by Brahms as an elegy celebrating the life and death of the painter Anselm Feurbach. More a celebration of the survival of art than a dirge on the death of a painter, it is rich in Brahmsian melody sung by the chorus in hushed tones, accompanied for the most part by pizzicato strings. The performance was gentle and devoted.

After a short intermission, the major work of the concert, the Brahms German Requiem rounded out a more somber than usual summer outing for the Choral Society. Yet, the Brahms Requiem, the work that firmly set the composer's reputation evenly with the other two B's, Bach and Beethoven, is, in much of it, a

joyful composition, not tied to the strict Catholic form of the mass. In fact, the piece is relatively free of solemn devotion, and devoted more to the living than the dead.

Asked about the title of the first of seven movements, "Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted," Brahms replied that the work might well be titled a "human requiem."

After the solemn motet of the opening movement, the second, one of this critic's favorite Brahms compositions, a march in waltz time, rattled the rafters of the Whalers' Church. After beginning with a walking melody stated by the orchestra, a counterpoint melody in the chorus floats sweetly above. Gradually, the movement gains force and volume as it develops into a joyful fugue with multiple entrances, and ends with a spirited, bone-rattling climax. Mr. Mangini and his musical forces did the movement proud, extracting every bit of drama and eloquence from it.

The baritone solo of the third movement, delivered richly by Ross Benoleil, developed, through the entrance of the chorus, into a march, And the fourth movement, containing one of Brahms's most popular songs, "How Beautiful Is Thy Dwelling Place," flowed like a beautiful spring in the eloquent sounds of the chorus and orchestra.

The fifth movement is essentially a soprano solo, once again sung with sweet richness by Ms. Zimmer over a walking accompaniment in the orchestra.

Now the music ascended in concert with the temperature in the church, the cascade of melody after melody of the sixth movement advanced from a hushed beginning, developing symphonically, adding a baritone solo and a heavenly descant of sopranos in the chorus and moving rapidly to a thunderous ending. The requiem concluded reverently with yet another eloquent melody by the sopranos, answered by the men, suggesting a beautiful afterlife.

The standing, cheering ovation given to the players by the somewhat perspiring audience was richly deserved. It was a masterful concert, masterfully conceived and performed. Far from solemn, it was an uplifting evening.

