



Chapel Hill Community Chorus Marks Its 25th Anniversary

by John W. Lambert

The Christmas program offered this season by the Chapel Hill Community Chorus was more than just a concert – it was a celebration, too, of the ensemble's 25 years of ever-improving music making in Orange County. Curiously, the CHCC would appear to be Chapel Hill's senior non-UNC-affiliated classical music group, and that alone sets it apart, but there's more to the story, and the event's title – *Rejoice!* – hints at the special nature of the occasion. On the evening of December 16, Hill Hall was handsomely decorated and packed full (no small achievement...) for the first of two presentations (in itself a first, if memory serves) of music by Bach, Beethoven, and Gwyneth Walker (whose "Rejoice!" gave the program its name). Attendees were greeted with a lavish silver jubilee program booklet, printed on slick paper and with a full-color cover, that contained notes by Artistic Director and Conductor Sue T. Klausmeyer, complete texts and translations, personnel lists (for the singers and the orchestra), bios of the solo artists and chorus principals, a celebratory welcome, a comprehensive history of the CHCC, and tributes from various area dignitaries (including this CVNCer). The booklet was a class act, even before the concert began. And the lineup of music reflected the overall excellence the CHCC has achieved during its quarter-century of service to the performing arts and its community.

Before the concert began, CHCC President Neil Shipman rendered homage and honors to founding conductor Victor Recondo, whose vision and service (until 1987) set the chorus on a firm foundation that his successors – Jeffrey Johnson, Carl Stam, and Klausmeyer – have, in turn, built upon and enhanced. The CHCC currently fields over 110 singers, nicely balanced by section, and its performances reflect high standards of technical and artistic accomplishment. On this occasion, the guest artists had strong ties to the community, too, and the orchestra was peppered with splendid local instrumentalists, including long-time CHCC accompanist Marianne Kremer. Thus everything was in place for what turned out to be one of the group's best and most heart-warming performances ever.

This got underway with two parts of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, S.248. Although called an oratorio and listed among the "Passionen und Oratorien" by Wolfgang Schmieder, the work is basically six church cantatas for the Christmas season. The pieces are for SATB soloists and chorus (a countertenor – male alto – on this occasion took the second solo part), but the instrumentation varies from cantata to cantata in a manner that suggests the varied orchestrations of the *Brandenburg* Concerti. Heard all in one big gulp, the *Christmas Oratorio* can make for a very long sit, so Klausmeyer's selection of two of its components – Part III: The Third Day of Christmas, and Part IV: New Year's Day – made perfect sense. The soloists were soprano Katherine Dain, countertenor Brad Fugate, tenor Timothy Sparks, and baritone Krassen Karagiozov. The soprano's from Chapel Hill (and her parents are "veteran" CHCC members), the countertenor's from Elkin, and he's currently pursuing his doctorate at UNCG, the tenor is on the UNC voice faculty, and the baritone is a former Fellow of the A.J. Fletcher Opera Institute at the NCSA. These artists sang with uniform excellence, and the chorus was crisp, precise, and radiant throughout. (Chorister Tammy Griffith sang the echo portions of the soprano aria in Part IV.) With a few relatively minor exceptions, the orchestra proved to be the best yet heard for a CHCC program – the horns had some recurring difficulties, but the other players were outstanding, and the overall effect was salutary.

After the intermission, the celebrations continued with Beethoven's Choral Fantasy, a work that – as our colleague Roy C. Dicks noted in his *N&O* preview – combines the best elements of the master's piano concerti with some of the grandeur of the Ninth Symphony in a far briefer work that nonetheless can be – and was, on this occasion – a tremendously uplifting concert experience. It was also singularly appropriate here, given its opening line: "The harmonies of our lives resound with loveliness." Pianist Frank Pittman, a product of UNC and one of our best all-rounders, did the keyboard honors, injecting high levels of passion and understanding. The aforementioned soloists, joined by CHCC members Sarah Paris and Bill Kodros, formed a fine sextet for the first vocal sections, and the entire chorus made much of the work's stirring finale.

Sing-alongs at holiday concerts seem to be all the rage, but here the arrangements – of "O Come, All Ye Faithful" and "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" – were by David Willcocks, whose wonderful settings and orchestral accompaniments make them among the best of all versions. (In addition, a whole roomful of folks can now claim that they've "sung with the Chapel Hill Community Chorus"!)

The grand finale – and quite grand it was! – was "Rejoice!" (2001), by Walker, an outstanding contemporary American composer (who also happens to be a woman). There's nothing far-out in the settings of three traditional Christmas carols that it contains; her sure way with choral music (and instruments, too) make this a winning piece that other area directors may wish to consider adding to the repertoires of their ensembles.

The response of the audience was warm and protracted, as well it should have been. The CHCC has done things right over the years, and it was in top form for this major event in its history. Long may it thrive! Happy anniversary!

For information about the CHCC's next concert, click [here](#). or visit the CHCC's website, at <http://www.chapelhillcommunitychorus.org/>.

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