

Choral Society Scores in French music

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DANBURY — The 25th anniversary season for the Connecticut Choral Society concluded with a concert performed in the neo-gothic Saint Peter Church. Its theme was "French Impressions" and the Friday evening event drew a very large crowd of some 400. As can always be expected from the Choral Society and its conductor John Robert Liepold, an unusually interesting musical evening resulted.

Music by two of the great French composers of the 20th century was featured: Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) and Maurice Durufle (1902-1986). Two of Poulenc's works comprised the first half of the program; Durufle's "Requiem" was the second half.

Poulenc, a rare combination of Gallic wit and seriousness, once referred to himself as "part monk, part guttersnipe." This duality produced works that are at the extremes of the sacred and profane. For example, his opera "Dialogue of the Carmelites" goes to the depths of religious beliefs that lead to martyrdom, while his one-act opera "The Breasts of Teresias" is earthy, surrealist and comic.

Poulenc, a baptized Catholic, returned to the faith of his fathers after the death of a close friend in a car accident in 1936, which drew him to visit the statue of the Black Virgin in the centuries-old pilgrimage site in the canyon at Rocamadour. The very next week he wrote the short ten-minute work "Litanies a la vierge Noire" ("Litanies to the Black Virgin") for women's voices, consisting of 20 petitions to God and the Blessed Virgin.

Eric Dale Knapp, associate conductor of the choral group, directed this ten-minute work. Indeed, the women's voices effortlessly floated throughout the church, as Poulenc himself had requested, "simply, without pretension." After the quiet of the initial petitions to the Holy Trinity, there came at the first petition to Mary a forceful and effective fortissimo. An agitated portion then led to the peaceful conclusion, and a highly laudable performance.

Variety in a concert is admirable, so I applaud the decision to have not only the choral music of Poulenc, but his Organ Concerto, with Aleeza Meir as organ soloist. Here is a work in which the jazzy world of 1930s Paris meets the structured world of Bach. With Liepold's downbeat came the initial chords, a mighty organ blast, which clearly took a great number of members of the audience by surprise. It certainly proved that the Saint Peter pipe organ had power. In recordings, balancing the power of the organ with the orchestra is

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relatively easy; it isn't in a church where the organ is to the rear and the orchestra in the front. Unfortunately too often that power in the six-movement work did overwhelm the 22-member chamber orchestra (at least from my seat two-thirds of the way back in the church). Liepold did provide jaunty rhythms when needed and in the organless moments, the beauty of Poulenc's orchestral writing came through admirably.

The Durufle "Requiem" is an acknowledged 20th century masterpiece. Durufle, unlike Poulenc, had only one side, that of a "monk." He was a devout Catholic and an organist by training. His devotion to his religion led him to base his Requiem on the traditional ancient Gregorian melodies of the Mass of the Dead. All the most familiar Requiems (Mozart, Brahms, Verdi, Faure) have portions for soloists; Durufle instead preferred to place the entire burden of singing on the chorus.

That the 70-member Connecticut Choral Society was up to the challenge goes without question. In the initial measures of the "Introit" of the Mass, the male voices intoned the ancient melody of "Requiem aeternum," while female voices, like angels, breathed out heavenly "Ahs" as an underpinning. As the program notes of Dennis Keene stated, it is "one of the great openings in music." Durufle's main purpose here and throughout the work is to provide a sense of peace and tranquillity in the face of inevitable death. Liepold's singers projected that throughout, always with the finest tone and balance of voices.

If Durufle had written nothing else but the "Sanctus" for the Requiem, he would still have become famous. From a tranquil beginning, it mounts in intensity to a "Hosanna" of incredible power. Joined by the organ, the orchestra and chorus made of it what it should be: an unforgettable explosion of praise to God.

There are several other segments of intensity in the Requiem, such as in the "Libera Me" segment ("Deliver me from eternal death"), but as did the beginning chords, the final "In Paradisum" delivered calm and peace. A fine performance and a noble ending for 25 years of bringing Connecticut music of high quality.