

Music To Send Spirits Soaring

Choral Society shows both range and talent

By Lee Davis

Under the sensitively wielded baton of the group's resident conductor, Mark Mangini, the Choral Society of the Hamptons becomes better and better. In their annual holiday concert last Sunday at the Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church, they were in top form, easing into their entrances with clean and delicate precision, phrasing their dynamics with sensitivity, and occasionally raising the roof with sheer exuberance. Mr. Mangini likes a challenge, and he throws them at his singers at every chance. And as the difficulty of the challenges increase, the singers' skills seem to match them. For one thing, he believes in presenting the compositions in their original language, which on Sunday meant an abundance, and maybe a surfeit, of Latin. When, three quarters of the way into the hour-and-30-minute concert, English appeared, like a sunrise, the feeling of relaxation in the audience was palpable. Still, the nature of Mr. Mangini's intelligently balanced program dictated this. As usual, he began with a major work, the seldom heard Saint-Saens Christmas Oratorio, which the composer wrote in a scant 11 days when he was 23 years old. Since there are 12 movements, it must have been a sleepless 11 days and nights. The oratorio is a lush, richly melodious work—scored for chorus, soloists, a chamber group, organ and harp—that flows through the story of the birth of Christ with a rippling panoply of moods. Opening with a pastoral theme that returns at its conclusion, it never ceases in its dignified yet constantly interesting stream of melody.

Sunday's soloists were, to a person, elegant and richly voiced. The exchanges of musical conversations among soprano Sasha Leinster, mezzo Suzanne Schwing, tenor Nicholas Tamagna and baritone Neil Netherly were rich and satisfying, and the quartet eventually became a quintet with the addition of chorus soprano Suzanne Nicolette. It was all golden.

The least satisfying in its composition, though not in its delivery, was the next piece, the purposely contrasting "Fantasy on Medieval Carols" by contemporary American composer Jonathan David. It was sometimes fun, sometimes charming, sometimes unique. A children's chorus, with their delightful, bell-like voices, managed the atonality with an aplomb and understanding beyond their years. This was particularly evident in a wacky movement in which the composer had the women in the chorus gossiping wordlessly behind the blissfully singing children, and the men found fun in the donkey brays and barnyard sounds of the Song of the Ass. And the nuns' chorus was done feelingly and effectively. Still, for all its effect, the piece emerged as little more than an interval.

A nod to Hanukkah was given by the short and a capella "Evening Prayer for Peace" by Hugo Weisgall, and Berlioz received his due in a richly reverential hymn, "The Shepherd's Farewell to the Holy Family." At the end, Mr. Mangini and his singers returned to the heightened interest and rewards of the Saint-Saens with a delightful "Winter Triptych" by American contemporary composer James Adler, who, like Jonathan David, used traditional Christmas music as his base upon which to build and ornament some modern variations.

His treatments of "God Rest You Merry Gentlemen" and "The Wassail Song" particularly, with only a harp and French horn for accompaniment, were particularly intriguing and successful, and not merely for their sheer audacity of orchestration and song arranging. It was just good old-fashioned satisfaction as the triptych culminated in a jolly ending, which the audience—and this critic—loved.

And that brought the concert to its expected and glorious conclusion, with master and yeoman organist Thomas Bohlert, (he'd been kept inordinately busy climbing stairs from the organ loft to the piano and back again throughout the concert) to finish the afternoon with four familiar carols, thrillingly delivered by the full chorus, overlaid by a soaring soprano descant.

It was enough to bring a catch in the throat and tears of familiarity to the eyes of the most wizened listener. And so, as it does every year, the Choral Society of the Hamptons once again delivered its clarion musical announcement that Christmas and the winter holidays are really here.



Mark Mangini conducts the Choral Society of the Hamptons during a rehearsal before their concert on December 9.
DANA SHAW



Members of the Choral Society of the Hamptons during [rehearsal]. **DANA SHAW**