



THE ROLLERCOASTER OF WAR, PEACE, & CHRISTMAS

By D. Rane Danubian, artssf.com, the independent observer of San Francisco Bay Area music
Week of Dec. 11-18, 2006, Vol. 9, No. 44

SANTA CLARA, CA---An imaginative choral-orchestral program linked timely themes of peace, war and Christmas with noteworthy highs and lows.

The message: There is glory in God, but none in warfare.

The San Jose Chamber Orchestra and a vocal group called The Choral Project combined on "Winter Gifts: Peace," presumably as a goal to be yearned for. This spotlighted the masterful English cantata "Dona Nobis Pacem" (1937) offering a seminal trans-Atlantic linkage of composer Ralph Vaughan Williams and poet Walt Whitman. The two never met, but still appeared to communicate superbly.

This pacifistic 36-minute "Give Us Peace" opus fits the warp and woof of our times ideally, letting us allude to the Iraq War through the lens of Whitman's decrying the depressing carnage of the Civil War (while Vaughan Williams for his part was showing his revulsion of World War One, in which he had participated on the front).

The serenity of the soprano's opening "Agnus Dei" turns increasingly anguished, setting the tone of the work. The choir carries most of the piece, through the hollow echoes of beating drums and trumpets, through the gaunt funeral march, to the symbol-rich "Angel of Death" drawn from the Book of Jeremiah. While the solo violin (Cynthia Baehr) draws a conciliatory tone, texts are intoned by the solo baritone, magnificently rendered here by Joseph Wright of Opera San Jose.

The piece---entirely in English---continues to a "Glory to God," with bells, percussion, and flourishes. And an *a cappella* chorus softly yearns for a peace that, for these 21st-century audiences, has so far proven all too elusive.

The Choral Project's founder Daniel Hughes conducted the combined forces confidently and sensitively, drawing out the tragedy with its fleeting glimmers of hope. Sandra Rubalcava rendered the dramatic soprano solos in a very forceful fashion.

The same concert also featured a world premiere, which we heard on the opening night Dec. 8 at the Mission Santa Clara Church in a crowd of 525. There's an amiable air surrounding the Midwestern composer Kim Sherman, 52, and her transferring that trait into her 35-minute concert *scena* "The Songbird and the Eagle" proved to be its best attribute. Here was a fable with easy-going music that will offend no one and stimulate very few. It tells of aviary adversaries teaming up to facilitate escape from a forest fire. The old-fashioned format, with narrator filling in the musical gaps of a plodding text, itself never takes wing, let alone soar.

The problem is that Sherman and her librettist Rick Davis could not decide on whether to target adults or kids. The fable's streamlined text and the chorus' animal sounds suggest kids, but the length of the work and its pace suggests a far more patient adult audience. In addition, inordinate demands are made of the juvenile voice for the Songbird (13-year-old Katrina Swift).

Sherman writes her music in a broadly recognized, consonant and rather contourless style, perhaps inspired by British composers of the post-Victorian era. Her best writing by far is for the ambivalent voices of the eagle octet loath to intervene saving the forest animals.

Jordan Charney was the sterling narrator, Allison Charney sang the role of the Eagle.

This repertory, bookended by settings of carols, was presented on successive nights also in Santa Cruz and Hollister churches.