



Danbury Concert Chorus refines traditional music with bluegrass band

By Jan Stribula
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Updated: 11/20/2008 06:03:46 PM EST

DANBURY-- There must be a reason why some music, no matter how you classify or categorize it, seems to stand up over the years, centuries in some cases. The simplest explanation I have is that it sounds good, always did and always will.

Harvesting a bumper crop of homespun and traditional tunes, Music Director and Conductor Richard Price and the Danbury Concert Chorus had an old-fashioned hoedown at St. James Episcopal Church last Saturday night. The Danbury Music Centre brought in a bluegrass band and soprano Jacqueline Horner-Kwiatek to present something old, something new, with selections of folk songs, spirituals, and classics.

Price wasn't going out on a limb with his choice of material or the accomplished artists accompanying the chorus. Horner-Kwiatek is best known for her recordings with the vocal group Anonymous 4. Her powerful solo voice certainly sounded stronger than the groups' carefully blended harmonies and shape note songs.

The acoustic bluegrass band HOE could provide subdued accompaniments for the vocalists, or

break into foot-stomping mountain music. The five members are Dick Neal playing banjo, Bob Csugie on upright bass, Stephen K. Miller on mandolin, Chris Teskey on guitar, and Larry Deming fiddling around. How often do you get to hear a bluegrass band back up a full chorale?

Maxim Vladimiroff covered the entire spectrum on piano, with a range of roles going from bare minimal to becoming a virtual orchestra in colors and tones. How often does Vladimiroff get to play with a jug band?

But it really wasn't all just a big hoedown. Price organized about 20 songs into a six-part program he called "Night Crossing," that encompassed a vast emotional landscape.

They began with a couple of songs from William Walker's tune book, "The Southern Harmony (1835)." As HOE joined the chorus in the happy sounds of "The Promised Land," I picked up on my own toe tapping, and quickly realized I was far from alone in that department. Horner-Kwiatek sang with amazing clarity, as the choir filled the tabernacle with its pure sounds. Going at breakneck speed, HOE hammered out "Dry County Breakdown" with fiddle, mandolin and banjo jumping on top of each other, while bass and guitar held them all together.

The rhythmic pattern of male voices sounded like ships rocking at sea in "To be sung on the water" by Samuel Barber (1910 -- 1981). With all due respect to the Frost family, Price led the chorus in some ethereal harmonies in "Sleep," composed by Eric Whitacre (b. 1970) to a poem

written by Anthony Silvestri.

Horner-Kwiatek sang two worshipful songs by Franz Schubert (1797-1828) and then became a warrior princess as the sister of Moses in "Miriam's song of triumph." Forceful harmonies traveled back and forth as they told the triumphant tale of the Hebrews passage out of Egypt.

Deming and the chorus had some fun with the playful traditional Appalachian tune "Cluck O' Hen," and with the HOE band in the Irish song "Sons of Liberty."

Horner-Kwiatek gave a nice solo reinterpretation of the religious ballad "Wayfaring Stranger," featured by Anonymous 4 on their CD's "Gloryland" and "American Angels." She sang straightforward versions of "At the River" and the Shaker dance song "Simple Gifts" by Aaron Copland (1900 -- 1990).

The program ended with an overview of the life and work of blind poet Virginia Hamilton Adair, set to music in "An Hour to Dance" by Gwyneth Walker (b. 1947). The poetry and songs grew and faded in vitality, reflecting the quicksilver passages of life experiences.

The final song "Take My Hand" had the chorus magically converted into a railroad train, coming to a whistle stop at the end. Price and company took all the passengers lucky enough to be aboard on a good adventure.