

The Philadelphia Chorus Sings Out for Peace

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By Aileen Lynch-McCulloch

On Sunday, December 15, The Philadelphia Chorus presented their winter concert, *Ring in the Peace*, at the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral in Philadelphia. The first half of the impressive evening of music was dedicated to the provocative Karl Jenkins composition, *The Armed Man (A Mass for Peace)*, featuring historical texts from authors such as Homer, Thomas Mallory and Rudyard Kipling, and music influenced by traditional music of many cultures and faiths. Documenting the devastation to not just humanity but the planet by man's penchant for violence, the composition ultimately opines that *Better is Peace*. In addition to Jenkins' work, Coreen Duffy's *Chanukah Fantasia*, Kevin A. Memley's *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, John Legend's *Glory*, Richard Dirksen's *Welcome All Wonders* and the McElroy/Joubert arrangement of *Rise Up* were skillfully presented during the second half of the program under the impressive direction of Artistic Director, Raquel Garcia.

The Episcopal Cathedral is an inspiring backdrop for a concert exploring the violent follies of man, both past and present, with its high vaulted ceilings and classic columns mixed with contemporary art inspired by classical themes. As the chorus sang below, the heavens looked on from the beautifully painted vaulted ceiling. This backdrop seems perfectly chosen for the didactic work of Jenkins, which was commissioned by the Royal Armories to mark the transition from one millennium to another, following "the most war—torn and destructive century in human history."

The helpfully detailed program notes the piece was first performed in 2000 by the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the National Youth Choir of Great Britain. Mixing lyrics and music from diverse religions and cultures that have been devastated by the violence of righteous wars, with traditional music of the Catholic Mass (including *Kyrie*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei* and *Benedictus*), Jenkins' work points out the historical prevalence of human warfare, and questions whether violence is truly an appropriate path for the future of the species.

The martial drum beat and call to arms of the opening piece, *The Armed Man*, is reflected throughout, building an aggressive momentum through the warning of Psalms 56 and 59 set to music in *Save Me from Bloody Men*, to the violent culmination of Homer's credo that it is "sweet and honorable to die for the motherland" in *Charge!* Broken up by the solo voices of the Muslim Call to Prayer and multiple references to the traditional Latin Mass, the piece offers a persistent call for attention to the fact that religion (particularly Christianity) has played a continuing impetus to the never ending conflicts of faith inspired warfare.

Perhaps the most haunting piece of the evening was the mournful declamation of war's ultimate sacrifice, the lives of innocents, as expressed in *Angry Flames*, featuring words by the Japanese poet Toge Sankichi. War, declaims the piece, leaves "countless human beings

on all fours.” The piece sears an image through the lamenting blend of human voice and the searing condemnation of Sankichi (who survived the bomb of Hiroshima but later died of radiation exposure).

Although originally created for a large symphonic orchestra and choir, the program was beautifully presented with a small orchestra (including a significant brass section) and the beautiful blend of the well appointed Philadelphia Chorus. Stirring moments were also offered by featured soloists Hajji Sahir El-Amin (singing the Muslim Call to Prayer) and Julia Wickland’s haunting comment on the grief of war in *Now the Guns Have Stopped*. Justin Gonzalez showed off his impressive vocal range in John Legend’s *Glory*, which was an obvious audience favorite. Johanna Schweitzer and Gwen Noone presented memorable moments as well during the second half of the evening. Perhaps most inspiring, however, was the message provided by the first act’s choice of material, which continued to leave its mark long after the last note was sung.

With such inspirational material, it is clear why The Philadelphia Chorus has been around for over 68 years. Coming this Spring, Bernstein – Mass (excerpts) and other selections by Chatman and Ruenstad with Justin Gonzalez returning as featured tenor. The performance will be on April 19, 2020 at 4 p.m. at the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral, 23 S. 38th Street.

<https://www.thephiladelphiachorus.org/>

About the Reviewer



Aileen Lynch-McCulloch

Aileen Lynch-McCulloch has been a director, performer, educator and playwright in the Philadelphia area for almost 40 years. She holds her MA in Theatre from Villanova University, and her BA in Theatre from Mary Washington (Fredricksburg, VA) and has also studied with the Dell Arte School of Physical Theatre. She has worked for numerous companies in the region with over 250 shows on her resume. She founded and managed the award winning Vagabond Acting Troupe for 25 years, before merging the company with the Steel River Playhouse in 2015, where she spent another four years guiding their Vagabond

Performing Arts Academy as Education Director. She has had over 25 of her plays produced regionally, and has just finished a five year stint as the Theater Teacher at the prestigious Baldwin School. Aileen was a founding nominator in the Barrymore Awards, where she has judged repeatedly over the years, was a Greater Philadelphia Cappies mentor and is currently a Philadelphia Independence Awards Judge for High School Musical Theater.

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