

## Concert Review: Mendelssohn Choir offers contrast of sacred and secular

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By Jane Vranish, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

The Mendelssohn Choir celebrated several landmarks Saturday night at Carnegie Music Hall in Oakland. It was worthy to note that this organization is 91 years old, with 20 of these years under the baton of music director and conductor Robert Page.

During that time, Page has trimmed the fat from the group, cutting it to its present day collection of 131 voices. And he has installed a professional core of 27 members to attract Pittsburgh's best musicians. The results apparently have borne fruit, for Steinway Artists announced at the concert that the Mendelssohn Choir has been signed as the "first vocal/choral ensemble on the Steinway Artists roster."

Most noteworthy, though, was the program for the opening of the occasion. Page chose two deliciously contrasting pieces, Kurt Weill's "Mahagonny Songspiel" and the world premiere of Pittsburgh composer Nancy Galbraith's "Missa Mysteriorum." The first was an irreverent, earthy and dry-witted chamber work, the second, for full choir, both spiritual and radiant, with an immediacy that could not be ignored.

With most of Mendelssohn repertoire dedicated to large-scale works, it was intriguing to watch only 6 members participate in "Mahagonny Songspiel." The piece, Weill's first partnership with Bertholdt Brecht, follows four gold-diggers and their lusty search for a life of drink, gambling and girls.

Weill required a sort of boozy, devil-may-care interpretation of the lyrics, something more difficult to do than might be perceived. Andrew Clark, Scott Morwitz, Stephen Hart and Bruce Klimcheck seemed to take great pleasure in their folly, although Clark occasionally led the group more astray than needed.

Their pickup partners in this crime, Jennifer Saunders and Kimberly Weston, better captured the nuances of life-gone-wrong, with rich, but not thick, sonority and artful bends in the phrasing.

Weill's reaction to the difficulties of his time gave "Mahagonny" a tangier bite. But nothing has gotten easier. So Galbraith's philosophical choices for "Missa Mysteriorum," in the face of today's similarly debased and even more complex society, was all the more interesting.

A church musician, Galbraith turned to the traditional elements of the mass -- Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei -- for her inspiration. But, with the audience relaxed and in touch with the familiar words, she inserted contemporary twists, primarily in the Latin-influenced syncopations and polyrhythms, to give a color and vibrancy to the music.

Galbraith began with a flute solo in the Kyrie, layering the instruments (mostly winds and brass with a relatively large percussion section), while keeping an open sound, no easy task. She then pulled in the focus with a solo quartet, the performers staying within the fabric of the choir. That set the stage for a climax early on, where everything stopped for a moment to allow the choir to collect its breath and unleash a barrage of sound that had more density than resonance.

The Gloria treaded on a lot of musical territory, but the Credo had a tight, introspective sound and provided the high point of the work. Peppery rhythms took over in the Sanctus, despite a brief respite at the Benedictus, and led to a serene and ultimately satisfying conclusion in the Agnus Dei.

When all was sung and done, there was something to be learned from this concert. Both composers had a powerful artistic statement, leaving us a third choice -- to learn something about ourselves.