

Britten, Owen and the *War Requiem*

On the night of 14 November 1940, World War II visited the city of Coventry, England. Luftwaffe bombers assaulted the city, and, when dawn broke, the residents saw their carnage. The most devastating loss to the city was the destruction of its cathedral—the Cathedral Church of St. Michael the Archangel.

The decision to rebuild the cathedral was made before the sun had fully risen on that cold November day. According to the provost of the cathedral, rebuilding would not be an act of defiance, but a sign of faith, trust and hope for the future of the world. It was this vision which led the people of

Coventry away from feelings of bitterness and hatred. The competition to design the new cathedral was won by Basil Spence, and Queen Elizabeth II laid the foundation stone on 23 March 1956.

England's foremost composer, Benjamin Britten, was commissioned to write a "large piece" for the ceremony marking the completion of the

new cathedral, which would stand next to the ruins of the original millennium-old structure. Since the work was commissioned before the cathedral was completed, this was a good acoustic challenge for Britten.

The *War Requiem* was not meant to be a pro-British piece or a glorification of British soldiers, but a public statement of Britten's anti-war convictions. It was a denunciation of the wickedness of war, not of other men. The fact that Britten wrote the piece for three specific soloists—a German baritone, a Russian soprano, and a British tenor—demonstrated that he had more than the

losses of his own country in mind and symbolized the importance of reconciliation. The piece was also meant to be a warning to future generations of the senselessness of taking up arms against fellow men. Britten dedicated the *War Requiem* to four friends who were killed during the first World War.

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Benjamin Britten

From the Chancellor of the Exchequer

Henry Sullivan, treasurer

Financially, the Chorale has made a good start on the concert year. Program advertising sales last fall contributed \$2335 toward payment for posters, brochures, mailing costs, program printing and rental of the two concert venues. As for ticket sales, net proceeds, after all PAC ticket service fees were paid, totaled about \$8900. This represented 360 seats sold for St. Timothy's and 283 for Mission San Miguel. After the Board agreed to set aside \$3000 in a "start up" account for the 2002-03 concert year, the Chorale has approximately \$7750 toward funding a major publicity campaign and other costs to be incurred by performing the *War Requiem*.

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Wilfred Owen

Rachmaninoff Soars in Mission and Echoes by the Sea

The music of Sergei Rachmaninoff is not easy. His vocal music taxes the spectrum of the human voice. Add to this Church Slavonic and you have one of the most difficult compositions to sing. On Friday, 30 November, and Saturday, 1 December 2001, the Cuesta Master Chorale rose to the occasion. Under the baton of Dr. Thomas Davies, the Chorale moved from the quiet reflection of pianissimo to the earsplitting volume of fortissimo. And they did it adroitly.

There were technical problems at both performances, but according to Dr. Davies, "There were some glorious moments." Despite the problems, the concerts were a major success for the Chorale as well as a time of growing pains.

The Mission San Miguel concert was sold out a week before the performance. The audience was more than appreciative of the chance to hear the Master Chorale in the mission, and the standing ovation bore witness to that.

Of particular note were the comments about the Chorale's Slavonic pronunciation. Several people commented that they had been raised in the Russian Orthodox Church and wanted to know who our linguistic coach was. They were astounded that the Master Chorale had learned the difficult liturgy from a tape. One woman identified herself only as "Anastasia, director of the Russian Orthodox Church choir in Los Angeles." She drove from Anaheim to attend the concert and said that she "could

understand every single word the Chorale sang."

The Rachmaninoff concert marks the first time since the 1980s that the Chorale has performed in the two-century-old mission. Dr. Davies plans to make performing there a yearly event.

Friday night's concert was also a resounding success. Although the concert was not sold out, St. Timothy's Church was nearly filled. The acoustics in the building are wonderful and added to the majesty of the Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Vespers*.

For many of those attending these concerts, this was the first time they had heard the Master Chorale perform. Many



said that driving to San Luis after dark was not an option for them. They expressed their gratitude both for the music and for performing in their "part of the county."

Britten, cont.

The *Requiem* was performed at the re-consecration of the cathedral on 25 May 1962 and the first London performance was on 6 December 1962 in Westminster Abbey. The work received immediate critical acclaim and was hailed as a masterpiece. It was widely performed both in Britain and abroad. Perhaps the combination of English poetry with the fa-

miliar text of the Latin mass made the *Requiem* accessible to such a range of listeners and caused it to be so well received.

The *War Requiem* is a large-scale work. It is scored for three soloists, a chamber orchestra, full choir, full or-

chestra, a boys' choir, and organ. For the text of the *War Requiem*, Britten interspersed the Latin mass for the dead with nine poems written by Wilfred Owen, a World War I foot soldier who was killed a week before the Armistice.

Britten's own *requiescat* came on 4 December 1976 when he died in the arms of Peter Pears, his domestic partner, and world famous tenor for whom Britten wrote every tenor solo in his compositions. Pears recalled that Britten was not afraid of dying. "He died peacefully with sadness at the thought of leaving friends and responsibilities."

The Cuesta Master Chorale will perform the *Requiem* on 18 May 2002. For ticket information, please visit www.tcsn.net/chorale.



Mission San Miguel



Notes from the Board

Sharon Carro, secretary

The Cuesta Master Chorale Board of Directors has met four times since the beginning of rehearsals in September 2001. A review of the minutes indicates that the subject matter discussed during the meetings was (predictably) organization for the Rachmaninoff *Vespers* concert performed in November.

The latest meeting was on February 4, 2002. The board and Chorale will need to prepare for the *War Requiem* concert in May. We will be able to utilize our experience from the *Vespers* concert although, of course, the venue has changed, and the addition of other vocalists and orchestra will present new factors to consider. But essentially the major jobs remain the same: to promote the concert adequately so that interest is generated and the concert is well-attended, provide programs for the audience, and manage expenditures.

Under new business is the matter of building a group of patrons and donors. Friends of the Master Chorale will be listed in all of our concert programs. Expect to hear more on this subject soon. We are also exploring the possibility of performing at the Clark Center after it opens later this year.

Nominations and election of new officers is to be done before the Chorale finishes the semester and goes on summer break. You may consider offering your skills and talents as an officer or committee member for our Chorale.



Xanadu and Chorale, too

The telephone rings. You answer and hear these words, "For \$64,000, which Master Chorale member is of royal lineage?" You pause, thinking, "Where did I put that membership roster?" Before you can finish that thought, the voice says, "Here is a clue, but you will only win 64 cents: he is a descendant of the great King David of biblical fame." Instantly (because you make a point of getting to know every Chorale member), you know that royal personage is Josef Davidman, one of the newest—and youngest—members of the Chorale.

The California native was born 23 December 1974 in Redwood City and moved to San Luis Obispo in 1976 when his father began teaching at Cal Poly. Later his mother was also hired, and both are professors of multicultural education and are affiliated with the University Center for Teacher Education. Josef says he grew up at Poly, and he is right! His education began at the Cal Poly pre school (Xanadu), and "in 1999, after what seemed like a lifetime," he received his B.A. in English. Following his graduation, he traveled for a year working for Lindamood-Bell Learning Process. He worked at clinics in New York, Ohio, Maui, and Los Angeles. During the winter semester of 2002, he studied Spanish at Cuesta and became interested in the applied music program. He



Josef Davidman

studied guitar with Dan Lishin and, to fulfill the performance requirement, joined a mixed chorus directed by Graeme Langager. This was Josef's first experience with vocal music, and the chorus quickly became his favorite part of the curriculum. He was particularly moved by the Irish folk song "The Ghost of Molly Maguire." Davidman says, "I've always loved music, and though I played guitar for 8 years, I'd done very little singing. Graeme's choir gave me the opportunity to sing at Mission San Luis and go on tour in San Francisco." Josef enjoys a wide range of music, from flamenco to the blues and the compositions of Francisco Tarrega and Issac Albeniz.

Josef delivers for Round Table in Los Osos (I wonder, is he a singing pizza man?) and tutors children in reading and spelling. He has applied for admission to several different teaching credential programs, including Teach for America. He hopes to begin earning his credential next June. "If I'm accepted, it will mean leaving the San Luis Obispo area and, of course, that would put an end to my singing with the group. I've greatly appreciated the privilege of singing with this Chorale and will miss singing with the group a lot."

Exchequer, cont.

Chorale members are to be commended for their response in the selling of ads for the fall program and encouraging the overflow crowd at San Miguel and near capacity one at St. Timothy's. While the Chorale has made great strides thus far, we must all be aware that the Britten will require a continuing effort to sell program advertising and an equally maximum effort to sell out the PAC so that we will be able to meet the great expense of presenting this unique composition.