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## Salisbury Singers in command

### MUSIC REVIEW

By John Zeugner **Telegram & Gazette** REVIEWER

**FITCHBURG**— The Salisbury Singers put the martial and memorial capacities of choral music on full display Saturday night at Christ Church, in a concert called “Songs of War and Peace.”

The effort was a craftily assembled collection of music, mostly celebratory, with a tinge of lament acknowledging the region’s historical ambiguity about American combat.

The professionalism and command of the Salisbury Singers was evident in their first piece by William Billings — in many ways still the most commanding (and earliest) of all American composers. His popular Revolutionary-era composition “Chester,” (often regarded as our first national anthem) was arranged recently for chorus by New England composer Gwyneth Walker. The Singers’ signature precision, crisp attacks and clear articulation deftly overcame some acoustic blurring inherent in Christ Church’s vaulting. This song launched the concert with stirring impact.

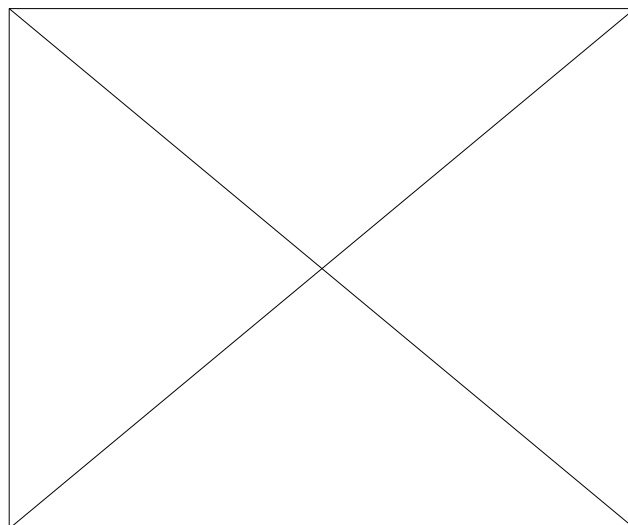
For the next selection, director Michelle Graveline asked composer Todd Milam of Melrose to come forward and talk about his arrangement of Civil War songs. Milam recalled whistling “Dixie” and “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again” as he walked through a New England graveyard. That, he said, inspired his medley for the chorus and a brass and percussion accompaniment. It’s always a risky proposition linking voices to drums and brass but Kris Asgeirsson and Evan Lattimore, on percussion, and Bruce Hopkins, Seelan Manickam, Topher Logan and Adam Porter on trumpets, trombone and tuba, easily handled the task. Hopkins was particularly effective in numerous solos.

Veterans were invited to stand during the “Armed Forces Salute,” as the chorus marched swiftly through the Army, Coast Guard, Marine, Air Force and Navy anthems. The Singers, with mounting enthusiasm, sparkled in each rendition.

After intermission, the patriotic apex arrived with the fourth piece, Randall Thompson’s setting of Thomas Jefferson selections, mostly from his “Declaration of Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms (July 6, 1775).” Only Thompson’s genius could make Jefferson’s convolutions musical, but in four brilliant movements, composed with all the passion World War II generated, Thompson achieved his “The Testament of Freedom,” which was widely broadcast to the troops in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters. The Singers were particularly strong in the opening and in the third movement, with Hopkins taking up the French horn.

The remaining pieces signaled a slight shift of sentiment. Thompson’s “Alleluia,” commissioned as a fanfare, instead became, under Thompson’s direction, a tragic reflection of the sadness of war, and the Singers — with wondrous immediacy and complex dynamics — tracked that grief. Massachusetts’ long-standing opposition to misperceived, misdirected war, whether against England, Mexico, Spain, Korea, Vietnam or Iraq, was briefly acknowledged in the Singers’ full-throated, poignant rendering of Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” and Pamela and Joseph Martin’s “Song for the Unsung Hero.”

But the supreme sacrifice of service was most recognized by the Singers’ encore — in response to the audience’s standing ovation — a tender, emotional version of the hymn sung at Martin Luther King Jr.’s funeral, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.”



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