

# Chora Nova concert pays homage to Saint Nicholas

*Music review by Jaime Robles*

*The Piedmont Post, November 21, 2007*

Chora Nova's concert Saturday night at First Congregational in Berkeley, "Homage to St. Nicholas," reminds us that the holiday season will soon be upon us and with it a multitude of beautiful choral music, caringly and thoughtfully presented.

The two-year-old choral group led by Artistic Director Paul Flight, also a countertenor who has appeared internationally in various contemporary and early music operas, presented an unusually lovely program that combined Haydn's *Missa Sancti Nicola* with Benjamin Britten's *St. Nicolas Cantata*. Ambitious in its scope, the choir combined forces with the children's Concert Choir from the Piedmont Choirs and was accompanied by a 20-member orchestra with organist. It also provided superlative soloists. The performance was remarkable, the chorus' pitch true and their blending excellent throughout the vocal parts.

Although Haydn's mass was formally exquisite as so much baroque church music is, concluding with an *Agnus Dei* in which the four soloists sing "dona nobis pacem" ("grant us peace") in sweet ascendancy as the chorus repeats "miserere nobis" (have mercy on us) in lower and ominously colored undertones, the Britten was especially fresh and exultant.

Britten wrote the *Saint Nicolas Cantata* in 1948 for the centenary of Lancing College, Sussex, which had been the public school of tenor Peter Pears, Britten's longtime partner. Because St. Nicolas is the patron saint of children and the co-patron of Lancing College, the college had suggested the topic, and librettist Eric Crozier wrote nine episodes from the legendary saint's history.

The role of Nicolas is sung by solo tenor, and the choir, including children's choir, portrays participants and eye-witnesses that relate the adventures as true experience, giving the cantata a theatrical edge. Tenor Mark Mowry sang the solo tenor and his voice shares several of the qualities of Pears' voice a startling sweetness that is nevertheless substantial and masculine in tone. Within his arias he conveyed a complexity of emotions from anger and despair ("Bow down your hard and stubborn hearts") to the acceptance and devoted love of the faithful ("my short life is done, and O! My soul is faint with love"), the driving thrum of tympani and snare exciting the words with fervor.

Britten approaches each of the nine episodes by combining the various colors within each musical group, which gives the overall work a feeling of ebullience and play. Section two, "The Birth of Nicolas," opens with violins playing pizzicato, and moves into modulating Lydian modes. The women in the adult chorus listed signs of the saint's childhood piety and as each event ended, boy soprano Alexander

Browne sang the child Nicolas' "God be glorified" with tender purity of tone. Within the section are mischievous musical inventions, as when Nicolas swims in the bath, percussion imitating the water's bubbling and splashing.

During "He journeys to Palestine" all the musical components swirl into the tempest that threatens the voyager, and the melodic line becomes more dissonant as a storm approaches, silencing the male chorus. The children's chorus, singing from the back gallery, rises like the flickering of lightning: "Winds and tempests howl their cry of battle through the raging sky! Ah!" and the men plead for safety. As the storm subsides, the soloist emerges; his prayer is musically direct: "Pity our simplicity" underlined by the hum of the tympani. The stars now visible in the clear sky twinkle in the light fingering of the pianist in the instrument's upper octaves.

Britten completes his musical layering with two hymns meant for audience participation: "All people that on the earth do dwell" and "God moves in a mysterious way," rounding out and completing this wonderful piece, wonderfully performed.

Chora Nova will be performing again in March. For information, visit [choranova.org](http://choranova.org)