

MUSIC REVIEW: Through music, a prayer for peace

By Andrew Adler

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"Sing, Be, Live, See..." declares the imperative of Frank Ticheli's "Earth Song," which goes on to invoke "This dark stormy hour,/The wind, it stirs./The scorched earth/cries out in vain:/O war and power,/You blind and blur./The torn heart/cries out in pain."

Such were the words that Frank Heller III, director of Voces Novae, has had swirling in his brain for much of the past half-year. Enough, in fact, for Heller to devote yesterday's Voces concert to the theme of "Awakenings" and "Reconciliation," against a backdrop of conflicting political passions that he alluded to in remarks before the program at the Church of the Ascension.

Yesterday was not an opportunity to test the boundaries of choral style. Even when the music turned vehement - expressed most convincingly via Harry Pickens' "This World in Arms" - Heller's aim was more to soothe than to rile up. He prepared his forces with his typical emphasis not just of phrases, but individual words. The church, with its clear, open acoustics, is among his favorite places to perform, and one could appreciate why through the hour's repertoire.

Pickens, who has uncanny skill at melding spiritual and pragmatically musical elements, collaborates with Voces as artist-in-residence. "This World in Arms" - set to a remarkably frank call-to-conscience by that celebrated pacifist, Dwight D. Eisenhower - is gruff where it needs to be, yet never coarse in its textures or expressive color. The choir sang with laudable focus.

Heller coaxed similarly convincing results in such works as the "Kyrie" from Richard Burchard's "Missa Brevis," Ticheli's "There Will be Rest" and in particular, Pickens' "Eyes of the Future." Michael Tunnell was the appropriately soft-hued trumpet soloist in Eleanor Daley's "For the Fallen," with Cantor David Lipp of Congregation Adath Jeshurun bringing a lithe, idiomatic voice to Gerald Cohen's invocation to pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Peace, indeed, is the ultimate prayer of "Earth Song." And as the final, whispered word heard yesterday, it could hardly have sounded so relevant.

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