

A spirited birthday tribute to Seattle

Wednesday, November 7, 2001

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SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER MUSIC CRITIC

Seattle turns 150 years old this month, but few music groups have taken notice of the event. The exception is the Seattle Choral Company, which commissioned an oratorio for the occasion, as well as its 20th-anniversary season.

The premiere was Sunday night at Benaroya Hall before a large and appreciative audience.

Scored for chorus, orchestra and four vocalists, William Hawley's "Seattle" is set to the famous treaty oration of 1854 attributed to Chief Seattle. Obviously there is no story, as is customary with an oratorio, but the words are dramatic by themselves. Hawley's music is moving, in a conservative manner, and juxtaposes massed voices, orchestra and soloists with considerable dexterity.

What is perhaps Hawley's finest accomplishment is that he gives renewed and meaningful life to the stirring words of the speech, making us aware, once again, of their relevance to today. A text was provided so one could readily follow along, connecting music and words in an enlightening way.

In recent years, there has been some debate about the authenticity of Chief Seattle's speech: Are the words attributed to the chief actually his? The program does not back away from that issue but addresses it in a scholarly and thoughtful way.

The soloists were able, particularly soprano Juliana Rambaldi, mezzo-soprano Carolyn Gronlund and tenor Wesley Rogers. Unfortunately, they were not given major assignments. The 77-member Seattle Choral Company was amplified by a women's choir of 20 voices drawn from the Cascadian Chorale, a long-established group from the Eastside.

The rest of the concert, skillfully conducted by founding artistic director Fred Coleman, was a potpourri of American patriotic music, spirituals, movie music and one example of the English choral tradition: Ralph Vaughan Williams' "On the Beach at Night Alone," taken from his "A Sea Symphony." The words, however, were American -- Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" -- but were inexplicably not printed in the program.

The performance was often rousing, not only by itself but also because of the way it related to the grief and terror of Sept. 11.

Descendants of Chief Seattle and Arthur Denny -- whose arrival in Seattle Nov. 13, 1851, on Alki Point marks the official beginning of the city -- were in the hall.

MUSIC REVIEW

SEATTLE CHORAL COMPANY

COMPOSERS: Hawley, Vaughan Williams, Williams, Thompson and others

MUSICIANS: Fred Coleman was the conductor and Juliana Rambaldi, Carolyn Gronlund, Wesley Rogers and William Rhodes the vocal soloists

WHEN: Sunday night

WHERE: Benaroya Hall