

UB's Chamber Singers team up with Connecticut's most respected choral groups for two highly unusual concerts.

By Leslie Geary

Faith Music

It was early evening, and rays of sunlight illuminated the stained glass windows, casting tickets of iridescent light into the church interior, where they seemed to swirl about the pews, appropriately enough, like disco lights. Singers entered the sanctuary, charging the sacred space with electric anticipation. Musicians followed, toting flutes, cellos, electric guitars, congas, and fat-bellied timpani, which would soon be tuned, trilled, strummed, and thwacked with abandon. Oblivious to this bouillabaisse of sound were ten members of Chamber Singers, the select choral group at the University of Bridgeport, who were performing in a special concert that was due to begin in just over an hour. Sitting in a tight knot, they did a final run-through of the program: Jacob Handl's *Pater Noster*, Felix Mendelssohn's *Heilig*, Bach's *Singet dem Herrn*, and Leonard Bernstein's monumental *Mass*.

It was a well-thought out evening, and the audience who would attend the April 23 concert at St. Mary Mother of the Redeemer Church in Groton were in for a musical adventure. All of the pieces were composed as dedications to God, over hundreds of years, starting with the Handl (in the 16 century) followed by Bach (late 17th and early 18th), and Mendelssohn (19th). But Bernstein was the Big Magilla on the bill. His *Mass* was commissioned by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy to celebrate the opening of the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. in 1971.

Goodness knows what the Catholic First Family had in mind for the auspicious event, but Bernstein blew away previous interpretations of the Latin mass with his reinvention of the sacred rite. A mix of rock 'n' roll, the blues, Broadway show tunes, and hints of



Marcel Ringold, Sam Hawkins, and Abraham DeSholel, of the UB Chamber Singers

Stravinsky and Orff thrown in, Bernstein's opus required no less than 200 performers, a full orchestra replete with electric guitars, keyboards, two organs, singers, actors, and dancers choreographed by Alvin Ailey. Bernstein then juxtaposed the traditional liturgy ("*Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus*") with the contemporary narrative of a young man, the Celebrant, whose opening call to "Sing

God a simple song" quickly morphs into a confession of faith shaken raw by doubt ("I'll believe in God but does God believe in me? / . . . Who created my life? Made me come to be? / Who accepts this awful responsibility?").

Audiences were stunned. *Time* magazine compared the Celebrant to a "curate on a bad LSD trip." Others hailed *Mass* as a "modern meditation on faith and doubt." But due to its complexity, immense scale, and massive expense, subsequent performances were rare.

Mass, redux

Now, 39 years later, in a small church on a hill overlooking the town of Groton, Connecticut, *Mass* would be performed again, albeit under slightly different parameters. (A second performance would be held two nights later, at Christ the King Church in Old Lyme.)

Gone were the Alvin Ailey dancers, fancy lighting (unless one counted the stained glass windows), or resplendent costumes by Frank Thompson. Instead, singers (women in black gowns; men in tuxedos) would perform a scaled-back choral version by Canadian conductor Doreen Rao.

Trimmed or not, Bernstein's behemoth requires a certain amount of muscle. Hence, three groups were performing: the Mystic River Chorale, out of Mystic, Con



Brio Choral Society, from Old Lyme, and, thanks to conductor Frank Martignetti, the UB Chamber Singers.

Like many in the music world, Martignetti plies his trade for love and art—and by holding down more than one job. A graduate of the Eastman School of Music, he serves as director of choral activities and adjunct professor at the University of Bridgeport, works as a church organist and high school music teacher, and is the artistic director of the Mystic River Chorale.

These various titles, as students learned over the winter and spring of 2010, would bring to the University's small music department tremendous opportunity, daunting challenges, and the kind of determined, faltering faith that Bernstein himself would have well understood.

"The *Mass* is very difficult in spots and the orchestration is rather complicated," says Martignetti. "In the opening of the piece, the soprano soloist is singing in one time signature at a certain tempo while the choir sings at a different tempo."

Nevertheless, Martignetti was eager to expose students to the kind of experiences they will encounter as professional musicians, and he's learned to seize opportunities where they lay. The concerts in Groton and Old Lyme fit the bill perfectly.

Mystic River Chorale was founded in 1984. Con Brio formed in 1997, and members of both groups have earned their musical chops by putting on respected performances ever since. Moreover, both groups were able to raise through ticket sales, dues, and sponsorships, the \$10,000 required to produce the concerts.

"We have phenomenal vocalists at UB," says Martignetti. "There are experiences they should have as aspiring professionals that I can't provide on campus at this time, and I wanted them to have this experience. The logistics have been difficult, and it's a testament to them that they're willing to do this."

Practice

It was December when Martignetti announced his plan to the students: They would perform choral masterworks. They would sing with much-respected amateurs, as well as professionals tapped for solo parts. And Emilie Hannon, UB's voice professor, would help them to prepare.

The catch: students would have to learn pages and pages of music in German (Mendelssohn and Bach) and Latin (Bernstein and Handl). Timing was perilous. The Bach, for example, tests singers' contrapuntal skills as intricate lines written for a double chorus weave a thick,

Stained glass windows by Jean Jacques Duval of France provided the perfect ambiance for the "Bach, Bernstein, and More" concert held at St. Mary Mother of the Redeemer Church in April.

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Left: UB choral director Frank Martignetti and the Chamber Singers at weekly rehearsals for the big concert

eight-part texture. Then there was Bernstein, with its own thicket of challenges.

As for logistics?

Sheet music for *Mass* hadn't arrived yet, but there were Xerox copies of the parts students had to sing. Martignetti would conduct half of the concert. Stephen Bruce, musical director of Con Brio, would conduct the other half. But students wouldn't work with Bruce until just a few days before the concerts. In fact, the 82 singers who made up the three different choral groups and some 24 professional musicians would practice separately, not meeting until two final rehearsals scheduled for five days before the first concert. Those critical practices would be held at night, 80 miles up the road in Groton, a week before final exams. Students would have to carpool.

"I was like, 'Oh my goodness! Are we really going to do this?'" says Marcel Ringold, a freshman from Plainfield, New Jersey. "Learning the German was very hard. The words slur to combine with another and it's very confusing. In my head I was saying, 'This is so hard!' but my heart told me, 'Marcel, this is your passion. This is *you*.'"

The youngest of the Chamber Singers, Ringold has sung with the New Jersey All-State High School Honors Choir, and he was determined to earn the upper-classmen's respect. "I couldn't let them down," he says. "I might be young, but I wanted to show them I was responsible and mature."

Ringold and his peers set to work during weekly rehearsals in the Arnold Bernhard Center. Serving as conductor and accompanist, Martignetti played the piano while he coaxed students through minefields:

"The S is like a Z. The D is like a T!"

"OK. Bach group. Let's pick this up again at measure 201: *Wohl dem, der sich nur steif*."

"That wasn't so bad! Let's do this again."

When they weren't practicing with Martignetti, students purchased CDs, which they played over and over again, until they no longer needed the shiny discs to hear "*Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Christe. / Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris*" running through their heads.

They texted Marcel, warning him, unnecessarily as it turned out, not to be late for practice. And when Martignetti split Chamber Singers into smaller sectionals to practice selected passages, seniors Chantel Potvin and Ashley Koval took charge.

"Everyone had a part and by then, they should have practiced it. So I'd ask them, 'What issue or measure do you have trouble with?'" says Koval. "Then I'd go to the piano, and we'd go over their part. I don't play the piano very well, just the melody line, but it was enough to get through whatever they needed help with."

Final practices with the other choral groups were far more intense than the Chamber Singers imagined.

Squeezed into two cars, the students pulled out sheet music, and as they made their way past Milford, New Haven, Essex, and into Groton, they practiced their parts, stopping briefly for dinner.



Show time! UB's Silva Vassileva lends her voice while (right) Frank Martignetti conducts the full choir and orchestra during the Bernstein *Mass*.



To their credit, the Chamber Singers didn't falter. They could have, mind you. There were sections—small, but entire parts nonetheless—of Bernstein they hadn't heard before they stood amid the sea of other voices. "It was like, 'Are we going to get this down before the concert? What is this?!'" says Koval.

As seniors, Koval, Chantel Potvin, and Silva Vassileva had completed four semesters of Oral Theory, which teaches sight reading. They could navigate the unfamiliar music. But underclassmen like Rebecca Beisler, a junior, or Marcel? They held their ground and carried on until rehearsals ended. Then they headed back to Bridgeport, and sang crazy loud to Lady Gaga blasting from their iPods.

"We had to clear our heads," says Koval. "You have to take a breather from it all."

Show time

Slowly, pews fill. Expectant audience members turn off Blackberries, flip through the program. On page 14, they find a note: The choral groups are joining forces, it reads, "to perform special pieces that neither would tackle on their own. We've selected works from different eras, but all take advantage of our augmented forces."

What the note does not say is that the 82 performers met less than a week ago. Ten of those singers are students who have made the round-trip to Groton three times in the past five days, a week before final exams, because they yearned to sing music whose complexity and beauty truly mirrors the divine. Nor is the audience aware

that the musicians have attended just two rehearsals. Even now, with ten minutes left before the concert, instruments are startling interlopers amid the mix of vocalists.

"This has been very difficult to put together," admits percussionist Connie Coghlan. "The chorus starts hearing all this stuff," Coghlan continues, gesturing to the sea of congas and Kettle drums, wood blocks and triangles around her, "and it's like 'What was that?!'"

Now, the time has come. The double choirs dive into the Mendelssohn with a burst of sound. Handl and Bach follow. Bernstein will come last. Bill Sorensen, a professional vocalist from Con Brio, is the Celebrant, and his powerful tenor commands: "Sing God a simple song: Laude, Laude ... / Make it up as you go along: Lauda, Lauda ... Sing like you like to sing ..."

Which, for the next 45 exhilarating minutes, is exactly what the choirs do.

They scat ("Du-bing, du-bung, du-bong!") herald ("Gloria tibi, Gloria tibi") and snarl ("Half of the people are drowned and the other half are swimming in the wrong direction") through the strange and wonderful *Mass*, their voices mixing perfectly with violas and cellos, violins and flutes, drums, organ, and electric guitars.

And then, it is over.

The audience rises in a wave, applauding, applauding, the quickening slap of palms carrying the beat of music out into the night, up to the heavens. ■