

"Salt Lake Choir renders warm, emotional plea for peace"
by Catherine Reese Newton
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War and peace were the focus of the Salt Lake Choral Artists' season-opening concert Saturday.

The centerpiece was "Dona Nobis Pacem," Ralph Vaughan Williams' eloquent musical plea for peace. The choir set a high bar for the Utah Symphony Chorus, which will sing the same work with conductor Andrew Litton in December.

Under Brady Allred's direction, the 150-voice choir, augmented by the University of Utah A Cappella Choir and the Copper Hills High Madrigals, sang with a warm, beautiful tone, keen responsiveness to phrasing and dynamics, and such clean enunciation that the printed program was scarcely necessary. The sound was especially tight in the second movement, "Beat! Beat! Drums!" Even at Allred's insistent tempo, every word of Walt Whitman's poem rang out clearly. Soprano Carol Ann Allred and baritone Darrell Babidge, two favorites of Utah audiences, sang their solos with professional poise. Carol Ann Allred's interpretation of the recurring plea "Dona nobis pacem" ("grant us peace") was particularly sensitive, taking on new shades of meaning at each appearance.

SLCA's chamber-size string orchestra likewise played with interpretive sensitivity and enough muscle to hold its own with the 250 singers on stage.

Two compositions by Utah's Mack Wilberg, written as companion pieces for "Dona Nobis Pacem," wrapped around the larger piece like musical and philosophical parentheses. The pastoral "Introit: Requiem aeternam" set a prayerful tone; the hopeful anthem "Let Peace Then Still the Strife" amplified the cautious optimism of "Dona Nobis Pacem's" final movement.

The concert opened with another piece by Vaughan Williams, "Serenade to Music," with texts taken from Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice." Concertmaster Natalie Reed's sweet solos were a highlight. But Glenn Rudolph's "The Dream Isaiah Saw," which Allred commissioned in 2001 when he was director of the Bach Choir of Pittsburgh, arguably packed the biggest emotional punch.

The SLCA singers clearly took the poignant "lions and lambs" text to heart, singing with palpable emotion.