

II. Culture and Statecraft

Schiller Institute NYC Chorus Marks First Decade with Concert: Music for Peace

by Philip Ulanowsky

Dec. 17—The Schiller Institute New York City Chorus was born on December 20th, 2014, with a concert hastily organized in response to widespread outrage over the Staten Island grand jury decision against indicting the police officer responsible for the death-by-suffocation of Eric Garner, which had come in the wake of the Ferguson, Missouri, riots after the killing of an unarmed African-American teenager, and which threatened to create dangerous divisions and violence in the City of New York.

The 2014 concert was dedicated to “The Sanctity of Every Human Life,” and tragically, just as the chorus had opened the program, singing *Dona Nobis Pacem* (Grant Us Peace), two police officers were murdered in Brooklyn as they sat in their patrol car.

“Blessed Are the Peacemakers,” was the title of this month’s tenth anniversary [concert](#) held in Manhattan’s Good Shepherd-Faith Church.

Diane Sare: ‘Common Missions’

On Dec. 15, 2024, the Schiller Institute NYC Chorus celebrated its 10th anniversary with a Christmas concert which was introduced by chorus chairwoman, soprano Jennifer Pearl. She in turn introduced founder Diane Sare, who, in [extended remarks](#), recalled her motivation in founding the chorus in an explosive social atmosphere:

“I was sure that people would be so angry and bitter. How could you take this to a different place than revenge and retribution?” Along with colleagues, she chose a sing-along of Handel’s *Messiah*, and the concert was held about a week later, drawing an audience

of about a hundred.

Afterwards, Mrs. Sare and others were asked, “Why don’t you start a community chorus in New York City?”

The first rehearsals, she recalled, “had about three people,” most lacking any knowledge of reading notes. “I just knew that if you did it every week, every week, every week, that people would get the idea and begin to come....” The chorus grew and found professional collaborators and, “by 2017, we



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Diane Sare, the founder of the Schiller Institute NYC chorus, addresses the audience on her motivations for founding the chorus.

had 200 voices singing on the stage of Carnegie Hall.”

However, she added, “I don’t think the world has learned the lessons we were working on in 2014.” In the resolution of differences and conflict, power is not a measure of physical might, Sare said, as the United States’ experience in wars from Vietnam to Afghanistan has shown. “What we think we are fighting for is the wrong thing. Perhaps mankind should reflect

on what it means to be a human being, what are the qualities that unite us, and work for common missions, each from our diverse perspective.”

Program: Classical Principle

Sunday’s concert, like that 10 years ago, began with the lovely canon (round) *Dona Nobis Pacem*, in which the audience was welcomed to join. This was followed by a deeply moving rendition of the traditional Appalachian carol *The Cherry Tree*, by tenor Everett Suttle. The song tells a story of Joseph and the pregnant Mary in a moment of divine revelation of universal love for mankind. Mr. Suttle—who, Sare mentioned, had performed at the chorus’s first concert—sang without accompaniment, transforming what one might imagine hearing sung in a more casual, folksong manner, into a musical example of something the Schiller chorus has emphasized and demonstrated throughout its many programs: “Classical” music encompasses not merely compositions of a long bygone era, but, rather, music that employs the natural beauty of the musical scale coherent with principles of harmonious growth and development in the universe, emphatically including that of mankind, to enrich and inspire a love of beauty and discovery of truth.

This is what lies behind the Schiller Institute’s choruses’ ability to offer diverse programs such as [this one](#), which included spirituals and English and Polish carols along with *Messiah* selections and Mozart’s brief and jubilant *Coronation Mass*, K. 317, not as a sort of medley but, to the contrary, in a way that unifies their common, universal character.

Community Performers, All Welcome

A small orchestra of 15 instrumentalists accompanied the chorus in the latter two pieces. In addition to Suttle, solo artists included chorus soprano Michelle Erin, and three accomplished professionals: alto Linda Childs, tenor Alex Guerrero, and bass Christopher Nazarian. Four conductors from the chorus leadership shared the podium. Schiller Institute music director John Sigerson received a warm welcome to lead the Handel selections; Mrs. Sare led a choral arrangement of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*; Schiller Institute U.S. President Megan Debrodt conducted the Mozart mass;



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Warm applause welcomed music director John Sigerson, who led the chorus in selections from Handel’s Messiah. To his left is tenor soloist Everett Suttle.

and Nancy Guice sang in and directed smaller ensembles singing the Polish and English carols.

The Schiller Institute choruses welcome all comers—there are no auditions. Singers from other parts of the country, with rehearsals on-line, occasionally perform in the Schiller Institute NYC Chorus events. There are Schiller Institute choruses in Boston, and near Washington D.C. in Northern Virginia.

Sunday’s group of about 60 singers (including a significant number of very new members, according to a chorus participant) demonstrated once again that, despite the wide range of backgrounds, experience, and abilities from novice on up, a unified performance can be achieved.

Sigerson and others attribute this in part to the lower tuning used by the chorus. While the difference from what became the newly standardized pitch (A at 440 Hz, or cycles per second) in the post-WWII period is less than half a tone, the proper metric does not lie in mere arithmetic. Rather, fundamental physical principles, of both the singing voice and instrumentation, the latter particularly found in the resonance of wooden instruments such as the string family, make a *qualitative* difference in the sound produced.

Like many institutions, the Schiller Institute NYC Chorus suffered a blow from the COVID-19 pandemic and is still recovering. But Mrs. Pearl noted that several individuals from the enthusiastic audience expressed interest in joining at the reception following the concert.