

## **Concert review: Rossini's 'Petite Messe Solennelle'**

Instrumentalists also shine in intimate performance

By Marcus Kalipolites

For the Times Herald Record

April 03, 2008

NEW PALTZ — Gioachino Rossini may well be known for the many popular operas he composed during the first half of the 19th century, but a religious side of this bon vivant deserves recognition as well. Though solemn was the way he titled his Mass, "Petite Messe Solennelle," the capacity audience at Tuesday night's concert at Shepard Hall on the campus of SUNY New Paltz experienced a sacred work intended to be more engaging than weighty. And fully meeting the composer's goal, Kairos: A Consort of Singers turned in a polished performance, which will be repeated Sunday in Poughkeepsie.

Besides the 16 vocalists, the ensemble directed by Edward Lundergan included duo pianists Ruthanne Schempf and Kristin Dockery as well as Gary Palmieri on the harmonium. This kind of scoring designed for intimate salon performances is what Rossini had in mind originally, even though he had subsequently arranged a full-orchestra version as well.

As a masterful little Mass of rare presentations, this late-in-life composition calls out for more frequent performances. And anything but portentous, "Solennelle" harks back to Rossini's earlier operatic kind of writing wherein he re-engaged his style of arialike melodies, descriptive piano accompaniments and an elegance unmatched by his contemporaries.

Before the tutti chorus even enters with delicate and sustained passages in the first "Kyrie Eleison," it's the spirited and contrasting piano patterns by Schempf and Dockery that set the mood in a different kind of religious music. Thereafter, most of the 90-minute music time was devoted to solos and small ensemble singing.

Among the soloists, tenor Glenn Knickerbocker exhibited an elegant voice in his delivery of "Domine Deus." In "Quonium," bass Michael Saunders imitated the fanfare patterns of the piano with firm and clear voice.

While, for the lengthy "Crucifixus etiam pro nobis," soprano Amy Littler's voice was both vibrant and poignant, soprano Christine Howlett in "O salutaris hostia" was expressive and intent in her delivery. Rounding out the individual solo parts was alto Tricia Lewis Agar, who captured the melancholy of "Agnus dei."

Soprano Carol Lundergan and alto Patricia Marquez blended well in thirds over rolling piano patterns in their duet of "Qui tollis," but equally effective was their contrast in the contrapuntal passages.

A change of pace from singing in the second half of the concert featured pianist Schempf in "Prelude relieux," an extensive composition in which the soloist deliberated with clarity the otherwise thin texture at the keyboard except for the dramatic conclusion of ponderous chords.

While the soloists occupied center stage mostly, the chorus as a whole was not to be outdone either in compelling sections such as the extended fugue in the "Cum sancto spiritu" or the lengthy exultation on the culminating "Amen." Equally impressive and in similar vein were the florid and glorious sounds of "Amen" at the end of "Credo."