

Salisbury Singers pay tribute with ‘Poets and Patriots’



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Jean Danton, soprano, sings during the opening number, "Dona Nobis Pacem," at the Salisbury Singers concert Saturday at Salem Covenant Church in Worcester. - [JOHN FERRARONE](#)

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WORCESTER — For better or worse, remembering those who died during the Great War is not a major part of the collective American DNA. At least it isn’t as significant an act here as it remains for many in Europe. This year, which marks the centenary of the start of the conflagration, is different, at least as far as the programming of more than a few local ensembles goes.

On Saturday at Salem Covenant Church, one of these, the Salisbury Singers, kicked off its 41st season with “Poets and Patriots,” a program that both commemorated the start of the war and recognized the upcoming Veterans Day holiday.

The concert’s first half was given over to Ralph Vaughan Williams’s “Dona Nobis Pacem.” Written between the world wars, it sets disparate texts drawn from the Mass Ordinary, the Bible, poetry by Walt Whitman and a speech by John Bright, which, together, lament the ravages of war and anticipate a coming age of peace.

Musically, it’s eclectic. The score ranges from chant-like modal harmonies to a haunting military march that channels Mahler to a soaring apotheosis that presages the finale of Britten’s “War Requiem.”

On Saturday, the Singers delivered a strong, cohesive performance of these variegated parts. They conveyed its text with understanding and earnestness. Throughout, the ensemble closely observed the score’s range of dynamics, which resulted in a performance of remarkably direct energy.

They were aided in their reading by a pair of fine vocal soloists. Soprano Jean Danton brought an angelic quality to the opening and closing movements, especially. And baritone Joseph Horton imbued his several solos with nobility of character and pathos. An extended ensemble of two trumpets, percussion and piano provided a suitably martial accompaniment, though, inevitably, there were some balance issues between the brass and keyboard.

The program’s second half was of generally less musical interest than its first, though the Singers continued their performance in good voice.

Lively phrasing, good intonation, a fine command of dynamic contrasts and a strong sense of forward momentum were among the qualities on display in Stephen Chatman’s setting of the famous poem “In Flanders Fields.” Brendan Ashe’s “For the Fallen” showcased not just a fine sense of dramatic pacing and good dynamic control from the ensemble, but also the marvelous, warm mezzo voice of soloist Paulette LaBarre, a longtime chorus member.

In both Lee Dengler’s bathetic “Things That Never Die” and Lloyd Larsen’s “A Tribute to the Armed Services,” the Singers sounded a bit stiff, but the latter at least allowed the chorus to recognize and celebrate the audience’s many veterans. So did “Thank You, Soldiers,” a rather maudlin tribute to those in uniform, past and present, that featured young soloists Charles Fosberry and Frederic Gondek.

The concert’s second half opened and closed with, respectively, the Presentation and Retiring of the Colors by four Junior ROTC cadets from North High School, after which the Singers sang (again, respectively) the National Anthem and the third verse of “America.” Ken Seims narrated.

On Saturday, Singers music director Michelle Graveline shared conducting duties with assistant conductor Aaron Knodle, currently a graduate student at Boston University. Knodle’s two turns on the podium were notable for bringing out some excellent singing from the chorus: alert, focused and urgent. Like the best moments of Saturday’s concert (and there were several), they left a strong impression and augur a promising start to the ensemble’s new season.