



The Dessoff Choirs: We Remember

A rich and rewarding evening of choral music from a well-established New York choral society under the direction of a new music director.

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Conductor Malcolm J. Merriweather and The Dessoff Choirs and Orchestra
(Photo credit: Carolyn Davis)

Now in its ninth decade and led by Malcolm J. Merriweather, its newly appointed ninth music director and conductor, The Dessoiff Choirs presented an opening season concert, *We Remember*, that built on the best of Dessoiff's traditions and set high standards for its sturdy, productive future.

Performed the evening before the American election, the theme and purpose of the concert – remembrance of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., two “outstanding stewards of humanity,” in Merriweather's words, whose lives were cut short by violence – embodied for musicians and audience alike art's core purposes. Art locates, grounds and inspires us; it gives us vocabularies for understanding ourselves. In the case of the works on this program, the American music of remembrance, contained in pieces by Steven Stucky and David Hurd, reminds us that moral and political conscience transcends individual lives and is strong within us all, even when our heroes are slain; and Mozart's *Requiem* calls up the universality of hope for salvation and pleadings for peace.

The concert opened with Stucky's 2013 *Take Him, Earth*, a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy commissioned by the American Choral Directors Association. Like all of Stucky's choral work, especially commissioned historical anniversary pieces, *Take Him, Earth* is deeply referential and intellectually pleasing in its text selections – here, Prudentius (with a nod to Herbert Howells who set the same text for his own requiem motet for Kennedy's memorial service in 1963), Aeschylus and Shakespeare – and coherent, richly resonant and gracious in sound. The music is distinctly American in its converging mix of discrete musical elements, traditions and associations. The choral opening is like a Gregorian plainchant somehow giving rise to a dark urban dirge; in the orchestra, the strings carry memories of romantic lyricism, while brass and wind instruments bring tough modern edges and the ceremonial French horn bugle sounds out the awful funeral facts.

Because singers' diction was sometimes blurry, the close connections between music and text weren't always discernible without reference to the program notes, but the overall choral sound was effective, its many textures clear. The final chorus, *Grave his name*, was eloquent and moving.

The second piece on the program was David Hurd's *In Honor of Martin*. Originally conceived in 2005 on a much smaller scale for quintet of soloists and instrumentalists, the work has gotten larger since then; this concert saw the premiere of a version for full chorus and orchestra.

The 20-minute, five movement piece is set to a passage from the Book of Wisdom (3: 1-3), a memorial poem for Dr. King, *Standing Tall*, written in 1982 by poet James McKenzie, and a repetition of the Wisdom passage.

In Honor of Martin is a strong piece and the expansiveness of this fully orchestrated version permits rich explorations of the historical moments and themes of the text. Unfortunately, though often anthologized for use in schools in Martin Luther King studies, McKenzie's poem isn't actually a very good one, and Hurd's subtle, historically sophisticated musical writing can't elevate the poetry to what it is not. In part because of the text, Hurd seems to have struggled with knowing which pieces of musical tradition to draw from in writing for the chorus: the work uneasily tries to fit together elements of symphonic choral poem and narrative oratorio, but the dovetailing can't quite line up or settle in.



Conductor Malcolm J. Merriweather and The Desoff Choirs and Orchestra (Photo credit: Carolyn Davis)

It is, nonetheless, a work whose shortcomings are far outweighed by its poignant beauty. The opening Wisdom lines evoke Anglican psalm-singing, move then into American lyricism and culminate with gently swaying Caribbean percussion rhythms; the Bernstein-like optimism is then cut short, mid-beat, by the arrival of civil rights violence.

Even when the text tells the ugly story of segregation, Jim Crow, and the contempt with which righteous resistance was met, Hurd cannot write ugly music: beauty always gleams through. After the shock of the assassination moment – the tough choral *Coldly* – the declaration of King’s standing strong and tall is elegant and eloquent: our capacity to remember King is at least one part of King’s victory.

The reprise of the Wisdom text is lush and lovely. We are reassured that justice will, in the end, be stronger than violence, and that salvation will be sun-lit and sweet. Throughout, the chorus sang with conviction, expressivity and evident passion, confident both in themselves and in Merriweather’s leadership of them.

David Hurd was in the audience. Loud and happy applause were offered up to the composer who in turn bowed with gratitude to the stage, where choristers, musicians and Merriweather all applauded their thanks in return.

If the first half of the concert was devoted to the memory of two specific men in two specific historical circumstances, the second was committed to a more general consideration of death, memory, mourning and salvation.

The first piece of the second half was Stucky’s 2002 *Whispers*, an a cappella chamber chorus. This six-minute work interweaves Stucky’s original setting of Walt Whitman’s “Whispers of heavenly death” with extended quotes and imitations of William Byrd’s 1605 “Ave verum corpus” fragments. The result is a lush and mysterious, infinitely subtle piece; the integration of early seventeenth and early twenty-first century sensibilities and the macaronic-verse lyrics created a richly spectral and shimmery memorial understood through the perspective of gratitude.

The remaining piece on the program was Mozart’s *Requiem*. In keeping with Merriweather’s keen awareness of Dessooff traditions as well as his own personal affinity for clean, clear performance style, Merriweather chose the Franz Beyer version of the *Requiem*, first performed by The Dessooff Choirs under Amy Kaiser’s direction in 1988.

This was a well-grounded and strong *Requiem* performance. The chorus sang extremely well; their diction in liturgical Latin proved better than their diction in English had been. Although the singing itself was good, the soprano section somewhat outweighed the altos and tenors; it wasn’t clear whether this resulted from the size of the soprano section or an uncurbed excess of soprano enthusiasm. The overall balances of chorus and orchestra were well managed.



Soloists with Conductor Malcolm J. Merriweather and The Dessoff Choirs and Orchestra (Photo credit: Carolyn Davis)

Each of the soloists – all gifted with strong, flexible voices and carefully attuned responsiveness to each other, Merriweather, the chorus and the orchestra – sang with confident command. Soprano Sara Brailey, who can make her voice materialize out of nothingness rather than simply “enter,” gave particularly moving accounts of her opening and closing solos. Bass Joe Damon Chappel, singing often without a score, seemed to approach the music more as liturgy than as concert material; without ever being slow or behind rhythmically, he always gave the impression of finding the music somewhere deep inside him and bringing it up slowly from within himself, as though offering it as a gift. The intentionality of Chappel’s association of text and sound gave his singing a sacred, prayerful quality.

At the conclusion of the concert, there were both long applause and enthusiastic “bravos!” all around. The soloists received flowers, as did Merriweather himself. The accolades were well deserved. Over the course of the evening, Merriweather distinguished himself in his unfussy, straight-forward authority, in the ease of the bond of trust that seems already to exist between him and the singers, and in his evident pleasure in music-making. Merriweather is a multifacetedly gifted musician: no doubt his experience as a singer makes him particularly sensitive as a conductor to both the needs and the gifts of solo singers and chorus alike.

The construction of the program was extremely intelligent. The pieces moved from the historically particular to the general, from the politically specific to the universal. The use of Stucky's *Whispers* between the Kennedy and King memorials in the first half of the program and Mozart's *Requiem* in the second was exceptionally deft and thematically effective.

The presence of Hurd's King piece in an autumn concert was especially nice. Rather than being confined in the intellectual programming landscape of February's Black History Month, *In Honor of Martin* was appropriately joined to other works according to ideas of humanity and universality rather than cordoned off into a separate-but-equal territory of music by a black composer on a black subject.

The concert, too, unintentionally served as a memorial to Steven Stucky whose death last February from a swiftly powerful brain cancer has been such a loss to colleagues and audiences.

If *We Remember*, as Merriweather's first concert as Dessoiff's music director and conductor is any indication, Merriweather's just-begun tenure bodes well for Dessoiff's future not just in New York City, where it is a regular fixture on the musical scene, but nationally and beyond as well.

The Dessoiff Choirs: *We Remember* (November 7, 2016)

Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center

1941 Broadway at 65th Street, in Manhattan

For more information: visit <http://www.dessoiff.org>

Running time: two hours and 20 minutes with one intermission