

Swell the choruses in alliance for 'Peace'

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

Ideally, Richmond Choral Society's well-chosen "Blessed Peace" program on Sunday could have launched a global tsunami of pacifying shock waves.

Failing that, it was enough to fill cavernous St. Peter's R.C. Church — no small job there — with beauty. And power. The society, already 65 voices strong, was joined by its own Youth Chorus and the Choirs of Wagner College. There were percussionists and a brass octet, and the afternoon had a world premiere.

The new piece, "Songs of Abraham," takes advantage of the patriarch's status as the father of three faiths — Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Composer Barbara Wesby has set scriptural texts from each lineage to music that pays homage to familiar forms.

A *hora* could be heard in the "Dance" Jewish section, traditional chant was audible in the "Hymn in the Christian Tradition," while the percussive Islamic section had folk music (Persian, Turkish, Moorish) motifs. Still, a melodic core united the sections, which were sung by the combined forces at hand, about 130 voices.

The Wagner choirs produce a youthful and enthusiastic sound, a perfect counterpoint to the gravitas of the society. Has director Roger Wesby, the composer's hus-

band and Wagner's choir director, stressed articulation? Every syllable they sang on Sunday was clean and clear.

Polished soloists — among them were James Sheehan, Lisa Lauto, Kelsey Pierce, Elise Rockwell, Ashley Primavera, Carrie Holt and Kaitlyn Pinkos — were drawn from the ranks.

The music of peace is a big category: All Christmas/Nativity music alludes to peace. Accordingly, the program began with Gabrieli's "Hodie" ("Today"), a Christmas song written for double choirs in San Marco in Venice. RCS and the Wagner Choir took it on, accompanied by brass musicians in the flanking choir lofts overhead.

The Society's Youth Chorus, directed by Beth Johanning, always does well, but they exceeded even their own high standard with "Let There Be Peace ("and let it begin with me"). Two intrepid, perfect young soloists were featured.

Marina Alexander, the society's director, did a little less conducting than usual; Wesby handled pieces sung by the Wagner ensembles. But some of the program's richest material fell to her, namely, the "Gloria" of contemporary English composer John Rutter.

Like other Rutter material sung by RCS, this one is complicated, searching, ecstatic. All the voices at the front of the church joined in, with soloists, drums and brass. Glorious: You bet.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF DEAN KROPP

The Richmond Choral Society, seen here in its 60th anniversary gala concert this past spring, will perform "Blessed Peace" on Dec. 4.

Richmond Choral to offer 'Blessed Peace' at St. Peter's

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

The Richmond Choral Society will present its fall concert, "Blessed Peace," with a world premiere of original music on Dec. 4 at St. Peter's R.C. Church, New Brighton.

The society, under the direction of Marina Alexander, will collaborate with the choirs of Wagner College, directed by Roger Wesby of Concord. Members of the Richmond Choral Society Youth Chorus, under the direction of Beth Johanning, will also perform at the 4 p.m. show.

The concert will also mark the premiere of "Songs of Abraham," written by Barbara Wesby, wife of Roger and a composer and pianist who teaches in the music department of Wagner College and serves as the music director at St. Sylvester's R.C. Church, Concord.

Mrs. Wesby has received six grants from the Council on the Arts Humanities for Staten Island (COAHSI) to write new works for local performing groups and she has extensive professional experience in music education, performance and composing in the U.S. and Central America.

Also featured at the concert will be the works of composers Johann Sebastian Bach, Giovanni Gabrieli and John Rutter.

Tickets are \$25 for general admission, \$20 for seniors, and \$10 for students with valid IDs. Children under the age of 5 will be admitted for free. Tickets may be purchased at the door on the day of the concert.

For information, call 718-448-3656 or 718-390-3205 or visit the web site at Richmondchoral.com.

St. Peter's is located at 53 St. Mark's Place.

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Richmond Choral cranks up the volume with an army of guest voices

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

If you need to hear many, many voices before succumbing to the spirit of the holidays, than the upcoming "Blessed Peace" program of Richmond Choral Society is your best bet.

Some 150 singers, more than twice the usual number, will sing the 61-year-old group's "Blessed Peace" concert Dec. 4 (next Sunday) at 4 p.m. in St. Peter's R.C. Church, New Brighton.

The expansion represents the combined choirs of Wagner College, plus the society's 20-member Youth Chorus, plus a handful of singers who are chorus director Marina Alexander's students at the College of Staten Island. Given the state of the world, Ms. Alexander is

Richmond Choral Society

Joined by the Youth Chorus and Wagner college choir for "Blessed Peace"

When: Dec. 4 at 4 p.m.

Where: St. Peter's R.C. Church, 53 St. Mark's Place, New Brighton

How much: \$25, general; \$20, seniors; \$10 students; at the door

ambitious about the "Peace" program.

She is hoping it's contagious, she admitted last week. Failing that, she knows she can offer listeners choral music "as a celebration of good will and an occasion for a happy collaboration."

The program has a world premiere, "Songs of Abraham," composed by Wagner music faculty member Barbara Wesby. Ms.

Alexander is a fan. "Barbara came to us with the idea for a commission and of course, we were intrigued," she said. "She has written a tremendous amount of vocal music."

"Songs of Abraham," which garnered a grant from the Council on the Arts and Humanities from Staten Island (COAHSI) is a setting of various Christian, Jewish and Islamic texts. "It deliberately reflects some of the diversity of our community," Ms. Alexander said. She doesn't want to give too much away, but she did say that the piece concludes with a sacred *hora*, the Jewish dance.

The accompaniment encompasses "all kinds of percussion." During early discussions months ago, she



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Richmond Choral Society will be joined by other local choirs at

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Richmond Choral recruits army of voices Dec. 4

and Wagner choir director Roger Wesby (who is married to the composer) shared a transformative moment.

"You put two choir directors together," Ms. Alexander explained, "and it's almost guaranteed, they're going to think: Double choir!"

The term refers to repertory composed for two ensembles, often occupying separate areas of the performance venue.

The piece they chose, a "Hodie Christus Natus Est" (Today Christ is Born) is an eight-part motet written by Giovanni Gabrieli (1556-1613), a Venetian composer who was the organist of San Marco, where it had its premiere.

At that performance, the participating choirs were stationed in different parts of the mammoth basilica. Ms. Alexander will try for a similar arrangement at St. Peter's. The separation produces echoes and afterglows.

"You really need two substantial choirs to really pull this off, and a brass ensemble



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE FILE PHOTO

Marina Alexander, far left and above right, leads the Richmond Choral Society during rehearsals.

Ms. Wesby, Organist Douglas Keilitz will perform and Peter Yourke will accompany the youth chorus.

audiences the world over.

The children's chorus will sing "Let There Be Peace on Earth," an original piece by

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