

War protest through choral music

By Dan Webster, For The Inquirer

As war and killing proliferate, so do the number of musical works written to protest and mourn that truth. It's a relatively modern trend; Britten's *War Requiem* began an era in which composers spoke out - and mainly through choral music.

The Mendelssohn Club sang out against death and wars Saturday in an adventurous program at Girard College. Alan Harler conducted the chorus, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, and the Bel Canto and Motet youth choruses in local premieres of James Primosch's *Fire-Memory*, *River-Memory* and John Adams' *On the Transmigration of Souls*. He opened with Szymanowski's *Stabat Mater*.

The Adams work, written for the New York Philharmonic's concerts a year after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, takes indirection as its route to fulfillment. No outcries here, but the added theatricality of recorded street sounds and voices speaking the names of victims through the choral and instrumental texture paralleled the emotion of, say, reading the names on the Vietnam War Memorial.

Adams began with the street sounds, then a trumpet playing alone from the balcony - a reference to Charles Ives' *Unanswered Question*. His orchestra was lean and colorful, wind soloists seeming to speak for humanity, bells sounding meditatively, strings whispering and soaring. The singers, the whole colored and leavened by the voices of the young singers, were expressive witnesses rather than harsh accusers. Adams' aim was to allow memory and thought to meet quietly. In his hands, it is a highly effective method.

Harler found volume levels to match the clarity of the singers' articulation, and sorted rhythmical elements well. But the distance between performers and audience kept the near-silent close from making its effect. Harler left the podium before the uncertain crowd could react.

Primosch's work centers on two poems by Denise Levertov about the Vietnam War's destruction, finding a note of irony in wrapping the bitter words in often brilliant, dissonant music. He made a strong effect with singing and playing that in places began softly, then swelled to near-outcry, then returned to silence.

Szymanowski's work mourned many things, personal and philosophical. His original text was in Polish, but the Mendelssohn Club sang English. The challenge of so much dense harmony seemed to vanish in this stylish choral reading. The orchestra, too, seemed to relish the unusual voice leading and harmonies.

Soprano Karen Slack lent power and expressiveness to her sections, and mezzo-soprano Ezgi Kutlu gave their duets added color. Baritone David Krohn's voice tended to disappear in the cavernous hall, but his accuracy was important.