

Arts & Entertainment

Westfield Oratorio Singers Dazzle a Packed House for 35th Anniversary

By THOMAS VAN DUYNÉ
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and
The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

WESTFIELD—On Sunday March 8th, with the first real promises of spring in the air, the Westfield Oratorio Singers held their 35th anniversary concert at the First United Methodist Church (FUMC) which was filled to the brim for the occasion. Directed by Trent Johnson, an accomplished organist and composer in his own right, the Oratorio singers and accompanying orchestra preformed powerful renditions of the Bach's *Ein Feste Burg* and Mozart's famous *Requiem*. The concert also featured solos from soprano Maureen Francois, mezzo-soprano Blythe Gaisent, tenor Mark Bleeke, and bass-baritone Brace Negron all of who sang excellently and lifted the concert to another level by their masterful control over world renowned work.

The first piece, Johann Sebastian Bach's *Ein Feste Burg* (full title *Ein Feste Burg ist unser Got, BWV 80* or *A Mighty Fortress is our God*) was written for Reformation Day, Celebrated on October 31, the holiday is meant to celebrate the Reformation,

and specifically the work of Martin Luther to in his sectarian split from the Catholic Church. Apty, "Ein Feste Burg" is based upon a hymn composed by Luther shortly before facing trial at the hands of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The piece is known for having elements of syncopation and complex rhythms that allow the music to mimic the natural speaking patterns of a congregation.

As a composer generally associated with the Middle Baroque period, Bach's work is marked by heavy featuring of the organ and often sparse, serious sounding arrangements. Highlights from the Oratorio rendition came in the seventh movement: "Duet" where a warm arrangement of bassoon, oboe, and violin with the vocals of Gaisent and Bleeke offered a joyful and powerful vision of hope and, also, in the third movement where principle cellist Stephan Fang and bass Negron implored the audience not to make "a place in your soul for Satan and depravity."

"Ein Feste Burg" holds a special significance for the First United Methodist Church. The program reported that in 1975, on the first German tour

of the Wesley Singers, the group came face to face with the Berlin Wall and were told stories about the hardship faced by the citizens who were separated from friends and family by the massive barrier. In an effort to show solidarity the Wesley Singers preformed an impromptu rendition of "Ein Feste Burg." A phone call from the eastern side of the wall confirmed that their voices were heard. Years later a visiting choir from the reunited Germany came to the FUMC and "tearfully" thanked the church for their display of support.

After a short intermission the Oratorio Singers began Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "Requiem Mass in D minor". Moving from the Baroque to the Classical period (1730-1820) the lighter sounding oboes were replaced with the deeper sounding clarinets, for a darker more 'epic' sound. The piece was commissioned anonymously by Count Franz Von Walsegg and Mozart was paid in half upfront, however he died before "Requiem" was completed. Needing the money from the other half of the commission, his widow approached several other composers to finish the piece. There is some debate about the authorship and of various sections of the music and controversy surrounds the piece, though this has done nothing to stop its renown. "Requiem" has been used at the funerals of many prominent figures including that of John F. Kennedy.

The invigorating movement of the strings in the third movement: Sequence stirred the audience, which was added to by the seamless exchanges of the soloists. The Oratorio Singers had their finest moment with the famous "Lacrymosa" where they performed with exceptional beauty.

It was a fantastic concert with artful and masterful work that all involved should be proud of. Congratulations are in order for conductor Trent Johnson, not only for the excellent concert, but for the announcement of the birth of his daughter on Friday.

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SHOWTIME...*Hairspray* will be performed on Fridays and Saturdays, March 20, 21, 27 and 28 at 7 p.m. and Sunday, March 22 at 3 p.m. at Union Catholic High School in Scotch Plains. Tickets can be purchased by phone (908) 889-1600, online at www.showtix4u.com starting and at the box office before all performances.

A Thousand Clowns That Don't Play Around Now at WCP

By DEVON YANVARY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and
The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

WESTFIELD—A running theme in pop culture is the story of the family that puts the "fun" in dysfunctional, and Herb Gardner's *A Thousand Clowns* is a benchmark in this category. Showing at the Westfield Community Players, the play is categorized as a comedy, however this is surprisingly misleading. *A Thousand Clowns* is a play that uses humor, absolutely; but that doesn't mean the show is three hours of laughs alone. *A Thousand Clowns* follows a group of fun-loving characters and shows how they handle the slow progression from silly to serious, as real life encroaches (as it often does!) and brings some hard-hitting topics along with it.

Murray Burns, protagonist of the story, is unemployed and that's the way he likes it! He doesn't have time for the daily grind. Mediocre jobs, meaningless work and up-tight bosses just aren't Murray's thing. And this wouldn't be a huge problem, if he wasn't expecting a visit from some Child Welfare workers. Murray doesn't live alone, you see. He has

been taking care of his nephew, Nick, for seven years, without any help from anyone. In fact, Murray essentially raised Nick from a mere age five. But now their arrangement is in jeopardy, as Murray must make a rapid change to his ways if he wants to keep Nick with him and out of the system.

Although the play is set in the early 1960's, it is in no way dated (except for some financial discussions). It tackles some hard-hitting topics which are still relevant today, such as: prolonged unemployment and financial struggle, untraditional family structures, romantic relationships, sacrifice, betraying our own personal beliefs, and existentialism. Despite the weight of these subjects, the characters discuss them with both humor and respect.

Russ Ortiz plays a wonderful Murray Burns, as his excitement, sarcasm and despair all come as naturally as if he were really experiencing them in front of you. He plays his role with conviction and ease, transitioning from seemingly careless uncle to businessman to misguided, conflicted loner. Ortiz is the driving force of the

play as he guides it through its many stages, and handles each topic—no matter how delicate—with care and just the right amount of recklessness.

Jacob Lesser, who plays Nick Burns, does an amazing job of portraying a sweet, well-meaning boy in an unorthodox situation. Lesser is a key component to the successful humor. His banter with Ortiz is comfortable and timely and his witty one-liners are a highlight of the show. The character of Nick Burns is written to be a smart kid who knows when to play dumb. Lesser delivers a performance that employs both cunning wordplay and the heartfelt innocence and confusion that only a child can feel.

Debbie Lingel plays the lovable female lead that is Sandra Markowitz. Lingel's character, one of the social workers involved in Nick and Murray's case, is the embodiment of the audience's opinion—she roots for the underdog, she questions authority in all the right places, and she isn't afraid to tell the truth. Lingel conjures naivety, fierceness, and affection.

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Thomas Van Duyné for The Westfield Leader and The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
HAPPY ANNIVERSARY...The Oratorio Singers celebrated their 35th anniversary with a concert on Sunday at the First United Methodist Church. The choir was conducted by Trent Johnson, who was also celebrating the birth of his daughter.

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