

Kent Singers Demonstrate 'Willingness To Explore'

By Julian DeGray

This area of northwestern Connecticut owes a debt of gratitude to the Kent Singers and to their director-organizer, Jon Lafleur, not only for the "Joyful Celebration of Christmas," as the event was announced on the program for the concert given in the chapel of the Kent Boys School, but also for all their performances over past years in which they have built up one of our most valued institutions.

What distinguished this Dec. 14 concert from the conventional programs heard at this season was the inclusion of composers of the early Baroque, whose names are known to us, if at all, only from passing mention in histories of music, composers such as Michael, Tomkins, Hammerschmidt, all of whom were dead before Bach was born.

This is a different kind of music, simpler and more transparent than Bach or Handel, with roots closer to the Gregorian tradition.

At the other end of the spectrum we were treated to a "Christmas Cantata" by Daniel Pinkham, dated 1958. These innovations spared us from the more familiar Christmas goodies that have led the unwary to associate the Hallelujah Chorus with Santa Claus.

The selection of all this unfamiliar music must have entailed a great deal of research, as well as dedicated

willingness to explore new idioms.

The chorus was able to stand up to the intonational problems of a cappella singing in a group of six fresh and original carols composed by Alfred Burt, but gained more security later as it was ably supported by instrumental groups of varying composition from number to number, with organ continuo in the background.

Other composers who came closer to Bach, both in style and in date, were Buxtehude, Bach's early inspiration, and Pachelbel.

In the first of the Pachelbel Motets, "Jauchzet dem Herrn," the chorus gave what was probably its most impressive demonstration with clear and concise entries of the voices in the fugue with which the motet concludes.

Even more arresting than the novelty of the early Baroque was the final number by Daniel Pinkham. The choral writing, as it appeared on the page, looked deceptively simple, almost bland, but the accompaniment by a double brass choir supplied authentic dissonance that bespoke Christmas as we celebrate it today.

The composer judiciously assigned a reasonably singable harmony to the vocal parts, counting on the brass and organ to supply the pungency that distinguished this as a contemporary work, somewhat in the same manner as Stravinsky had done in his Symphony of Psalms.

The chorus was clearly at home in this contemporary idiom and delivered the Latin text with conviction and dramatic power.

No one will dispute that the ensemble of the chorus would gain from recruitment of more men's voices, but the dearth of tenors is a notorious problem in all but a few professional choruses. It will eventually be solved by the creation of a choral tradition in this country, a tradition which the Kent Singers are helping to promote.

We must hope that there will be a

generous response to an appeal, contained in the printed program, for additional singers to take part in the spring concert of May 17. The excellence of Sunday's performance served only to show what a rich opportunity this offers to anyone with a moderately good voice.

Local support and enthusiasm for what the Kent Singers have to offer were amply demonstrated by a near-capacity audience undeterred by snow squalls that threatened the possibility of icy roads.