

## Encore: Ars Choralis repeats "Music In Desperate Times: Remembering the Women's Orchestra of Birchenau"



By definition, a once in a lifetime experience doesn't get repeated.

And yet, what seemed last year like such an experience is now being repeated, on April 14 and 15. It's a concert by the Woodstock ensemble Ars Choralis and

associated instrumentalists called "Music in Desperate Times: Remembering the Women's Orchestra of Birchenau." As someone who walked out of a performance last year with tears in his eyes, I can attest to the effectiveness and moving quality of this unique concert.

Ars Choralis's music director, Barbara Pickhardt, finds it easy to explain why this concert is being repeated. "There was an overwhelming response to the last concert and the calls to make it available again were insistent. I think the concert is worthy of being heard. It's an important story." That story concerns musicians incarcerated at a Nazi concentration camp who were required to perform for their captors, a story told in Arthur Miller's film *Playing for Time*. This year's performances are timed to coincide with Holocaust Remembrance Week.

Johanna Hall is a regular member of Ars Choralis, but she was away when last year's performances took place. I asked her what it was like to go through rehearsals for such an intense performance. "Since I didn't sing it the last time," she told me, "I can only tell that, sitting in rehearsal and hearing the voices rising around me, I started crying. I asked Barbara how I could sing and not break down, and she said, 'You'll be able to.' But she also gave me a copy of the script so I could be prepared.

"I find the music of this concert to be very haunting. It comes back into my mind as I'm going about my day. Maybe it's because you don't inure yourself to it but you familiarize yourself enough so that you can get through. But still, when I think of the music at the end of the concert, I spontaneously get tears in my eyes.

"We deal with it the same way any artist prepares for a performance. You have to balance the emotion of it with some sort of technique. Yet you want to be in the moment. It's probably a conundrum that faces performers of all kinds. It's a very heavy experience."

I asked Pickhardt if there were special challenges to repeating a concert, as opposed to the usual way she prepares new programs. "Repeating provides new challenges," she said. "What could be done differently? How can this concert be more effective without losing its basic integrity? What we did last time was strong and powerful. I had to stop and think clearly about why this concert was important. The orchestra itself spoke not only to the audience but to what actually happened in Birchenau. There was a connection from the people performing today to those in the past.

"We went through all our spoken texts and tried to look at them objectively. It was hard. Are there words here that don't help, that get in the way, that lead one's thinking along the wrong path? I made some revisions, in collaboration with others.

"I also thought about the music. Was there any-thing that could be better for the chorus? What about people who would want to come again? Would they be disappointed? Could they be so moved again? Getting the same musicians again could have been a problem, but everyone involved the first time wanted to do it again. Only two people weren't available and both of them wanted to do it if we repeat the concert again, which we will do."

Leslie Gerber

*from The Woodstock Times, April 12, 2007*