

Politics came into play

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Music

Canto Coro: Mauthausen and Black Cargo

Trades Hall, 19 September

Review **Jeff Pressing**

ONE function of art is to confront convention; another is to project the values of its creator in a communal experience. Musical art with a political message then faces a challenge: if the composer wants to communicate widely, she or he may need to skirt artistic innovation and adapt prefabricated musical vernaculars, honed with a particular audience in mind.

This was the guiding approach of the two large-scale works presented on Sunday evening by Canto Coro, a group focusing on folkloric aspects of Greek and Hispanic musical traditions.

First was *Mauthausen*, a setting to music by Mikis Theodorakis of poems written by a survivor (Iacovos Kambanellis) of the Mauthausen Austrian concentration camp of World War II.

Kambanellis' powerfully smouldering yet matter-of-fact descriptions of the camp's variegated cruelties gave the work a clear frame of action, and in each four sections the poems were both read aloud (in English) and sung (in Greek), besides being printed in the program. The simplistic musical writing is not among Theodorakis' best efforts, but Canto Coro made a strong presentation, balancing instrumental forces of trumpet, bass, bouzouki, guitar, and accordion with the 60-member choir and plaintive vibrato of alto soloist Anna Stephanos.

Conductor, Mark Dunbar, coaxed a dynamically disciplined exuberance from the choir that suited the musical idiom.

More variable and effective in musical content was the second work, *Black Cargo*. This eight-section song cycle the by local composer Irine Vela displayed a mixed bag of populist musical styles, seldom venturing harmonically from basic triads. Nevertheless, the changes of texture were frequent and well-paced. Solo vocalists rubbed shoulders with electric guitars, bluegrass backbeats with repeated-note choral motives, meandering ballad melodies with syncopated Latin timbale solos.

Ensemble was generally excellent, though the three soloists had trouble at times projecting above the other musical forces. John Romeril's accompanying text about confrontations between left and right-wing unions did not achieve the expressive projection it might have, for it was recited only in part and, surprisingly, not printed in the program. ■