Missae Solemnis an appropriate finale


By Joel West

In their third and final concert of the academic year the MIT Choral Society presented a satisfying rendition of Beethoven's Missa Solemnis; its entirety, the afternoon's performance ranged from good to excellent.

The soloists Sunday were as good a crop as the Choral Society has ever had, ranking with the soloists procured for Boston Symphony concerts with the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, another John Oliver group. The solo quartet was not alone, however, as the chorus's efforts demonstrated that, though not consistent in quality, at their best they rank with the best choirs in the Boston area.

Soprano Cheryl Studer gave what was, by any standards, a stunning performance. At age 22, she is young enough to be a student, but her voice Sunday showed that she has learned her lessons well. In the lowest passages, her voice proved strong enough to be heard over the remaining vocal trio, chorus and orchestra combined, while in softer passages it was always perfectly under control, as it was in the "Qui tollis" of the Agnus Dei. In the final section of the Credo, her performance was superlative.

The other soloists, though good, tended to be overshadowed in ensemble with Studer. William Fleck was the best of the remaining soloists; deep and strong, he was clearly a bass rather than a bass-baritone. Lewis Brindle had a clean, clear voice that only occasionally showed signs of strain.

Missa Solemnis marks the first appearance of the Choral Society in Sacred Heart Church since the Verdi Requiem of December 1977. The improvement in acoustics over Kresge is of course phenomenal, especially for a large mass such as the Missa; the psychological effect on the chorus and audience be discounted either.

Though some orchestral passages were rough, the opening Kyrie was respectable enough—good, but not stunningly so. Such was saved for the magnificent Gloria, which called to mind the choruses of the Verdi Requiem. The basses were very good on the difficult lower notes, while the women displayed sensitivity in their treatment of the contrasting soft sections.

As with the soloists, the soprano in general demonstrated an ability to overwhelm the other sections; the tenors were lost in the choral texture in all but a few entrances. The chorus, obviously competent and well-rehearsed, gave, when individually inspired, an inspired performance: the enthusiasm of the amateur group gave a far more exciting result than is often produced by more expert choirs.

Finally, the experienced hand of conductor John Oliver was evident throughout, with only a few subtle problems of balance that remained unsolved. If nothing else, Sunday's concert confirmed that the Choral Society, when motivated and released from its Kresge acoustical prison, is capable of a truly first-rate result.