Donald Sur's Slavery Documents is as profound as it is simply academic. The premiere of a new work by Donald Sur, The Cantata Singers & Ensemble, David Howen, Music Director. Symphony Hall, March 23.

The completion of the trilogy with Sur's new work cements the Cantata Singers as a force of international importance in creating new works that shine not only on a musical level, but which lie for their auditors, delivering messages to make them think, make them weep, and send them away renewed.

Sur's libretto juxtaposes Cotton Mathers' "The Negro Christianized" — a lively on the joys of the slave who has found Jesus — with advertisements for the return of escaped slaves and other texts which uncover the realities of slavery and the mentality which held it in place.

And Christian slaves may challenge their own.

The blessings claimed in fabled states alone —

The cabin home, not comfortless, though rude, Light daily labour, and abundant food,

The sturdy health that temperate habits yield,

The cheerful song that rings in every field.

Sur's music plays the role of truth-teller, hailing as the real lashes the texts describe, but delivering a feeling of numbing hollowness to accompany Mathers' self-deception — if not downright dishonest — lines. Taking his audience on an epic roller-coaster ride, Sur plunges his listeners into darkness, lifts them to a false image of light, and submerges them in obscenity once more. As his work progresses, it becomes clear that the roller-coaster's world is one of pure evil, a system of unquestioned assumptions about human life which allows slavery to persist.

For Slavery Documents, the Cantata Singers augmented both their chorus and orchestra, producing strong well-directed showings from both. The five soloists contributed rich performances, too. The piece opened with sounds of massive turbulence for the questioning of "Who is that Great God whom you and all men are to serve," truants introduced with the choral refrain: "and there is no God but he." A bassoon enters, describing the lot of the supposed contented slave; a radiant harp melody focuses attention, its worldly serenity conveying falsehood.

During an account of a South Carolina statute, a flute sweetly seeps through the thick authoritarian textures which surround and drown it. But a description of lashes descends percussively, tenor Rockland Osgood vocally sounding "the most unbearable heaviness. There was an extraordinary climax on the word "Christ," the strings continuing mercilessly after the voices stop. The New Testament text continues "not in the way of eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ," but this is not included in Sur's libretto. Sur includes only the false biblical interpretation which allowed slavery to be legitimized.

The score contains many fugal elements looking back to Bach; Sur also follows on from a Mozarean tradition of allowing his music to speak truth while the words to which it is set pour forth lies. But his message is original and, in the end, our ability to freely listen to it and to be exposed to its ultimate truth, is life-affirming.

The large audience stayed longer than usual after the concert ended, discussing the work in the lobby and looking at the drawings and texts by children displayed in the lobby and looking at the drawings and texts by children displayed. "We all see together as one, so let's act that way," said one child's voice. Donald Sur's work provides the prospect that we might do so.