

Particularly impressive were works by David Felder and Augusta Read Thomas, which pushed at both the harmonic fabric with daring chromatic writing and at the capacities of the voices with parts written in punishingly high tessitura. Others, such as Roger Davidson, opted to revel in the group's sound and suave divisi in a more straightforward setting.

One of the challenges in being part of a bouquet of occasional works: how expansive should one's piece be? Both Thea Musgrave and Richard Danielpour opted for aphoristic yet attractive tributes, while Richard Wernick and Joseph Schwantner created evocatively atmospheric works that probably overstayed their welcome a bit. David Lang created a slowed down spiritual for the singers, poking fun at the perky arrangements of doleful texts by choral mainstays such as Alice Parker and Robert Shaw. For all of her protestations that setting text doesn't suit her, Joan Tower's memorial tribute to her recently departed sister was eloquent and unforced.

Sadly, I found another of the memorial works on the program, Memorial by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, more problematic. In the midst of snatches of the requiem mass' text, the use of children's choir intoning the names of Sandy Hook victims is heavy handed and borderline exploitative. No doubt, some will argue that the work's topicality and pacifistic message is moving. Indeed, it was moving, but, to me, manipulatively so. One could have gotten the subtext from a more subtle use of forces and an approach to the topic that was sensitive and less opportunistic.

Most of the works hewed to the celebratory mood of the occasion. William Bolcom provided a puckish setting of a Blake poem about Cupid; a footnote to his mammoth Songs of Innocence and Experience project, but a savory and supple one. Mark Adamo contributed the only work with piano accompaniment, in which the singers and instrument nimbly dance around the subtext of a grimly jocular Stoic postmortem. Aaron Kernis was on hand not only to introduce his piece (as did several of the other composers) but also to substitute as a "clapper" (hand percussionist) for his jubilant setting of the translation of a Hebrew spiritual poem.

All in all, it was a fine afternoon of singing. The commissions are being recorded for release on Soundbrush Records. Hopefully more choirs will hear them and want to program them.