A Mozart Work as ‘Difficult as Anything’

Handel Society Grapples With Mass in C-Minor

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The way mountaineers find K2—the second-highest peak on Earth—more of a challenge than mighty Everest, choral groups of ambition attempt to scale Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s Mass in C-Minor far less often in concert than his better-known Requiem Mass in D Minor.

None of which is deterring the 100-plus members of the Handel Society of Dartmouth College from shooting for the summit with two performances of the 19-movement package this weekend at Spaulding Auditorium.

“It’s as difficult as anything we have put up in our spring performances,” Handel Society director Robert Duff said this week. “We’ve done songs like Bach’s St. Matthew Passion that all have their issues and challenges, but here we’re working with an opera composer who has given us long runs of notes that require stamina and vocal technique in a very different way.”

Enter the society’s secret weapon, opera singer Erma Mellingler of West Lebanon, whom Duff has called in for six sessions to tutor the Dartmouth undergraduates, graduate students, faculty and staff, and civilians who make up the group. For this Mozart work, she led voice lessons during early rehearsals in January, gave the singers 15 vocal exercises as daily homework, and in late April led a two-hour “reality check” before assigning yet more preparatory work.

“That’s a very European model,” Duff said. “It’s another set of ears. She’s very gifted. It’s good to have her in the room.”

About the only part more complicated than staging this Mass, which rarely happens in the United States, is the work that Harvard University pianist and scholar Robert Levin put into completing a work that Mozart set aside for lack of support from his rival and religious patrons, whose demands for simplification limited most choral works to 45 minutes. Levin, who had also picked up the torch of the Requi-