LESSONS AND CAROLS FOR ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS:
4:30 and 8 p.m. Sunday, Mead Chapel, Middlebury College. The college choir, chamber singers, Womensing, and Francois Clemmons, artist-in-residence and founder and director of Harlem Spiritual Ensemble. 443-5221.
By Jack Thurston
Staff Writer

Despite the early November chill, the Continental Harmony program warmed and enlivened the students, alumni, staff and townspeople who packed Mead Chapel Friday night. Accompanied by organist Emory Fanning, and under the direction of Francois Clemmons, the Middlebury College and Community Choirs opened the evening with selections from Handel's "Samson." The black and white-outfitted choirs, owing largely to their impressive numbers, navigated the richly complex scores with elegance and unity. Next, Chamber Choir Director Jeff Rebach, with twice Clemmons' histrionics and half his grace, led the singers in "The Last Words of David." Alumnus soloists Meredith Parsons McComb '75 and Marjorie Balgooyen Drysdale '71 contributed well-executed renditions of "Let the Bright Seraphim" and "I Lift Up Mine Eyes" respectively.

Following the performances, John McCue distributed pewter bicentennial medals to distinguished Addison County residents who have positively impacted the community as a whole. The recipients, including Gordon and Alice Perine, and proud "Middlebury Mom" Cheryl Mitchell, are all exemplars of public service in education, the arts, medicine, and local politics. These selfless individuals were only the first to receive a standing ovation from the packed pews.

Maestro Clemmons returned, this time flanked by the Harlem Spiritual Ensemble. The honed performers' sequined outfits and personalities sparkled as Clemmons set the mood for the performance with a witty and engaging introduction that segued to "Dere is a Balm in Gilead." He then let his mezzo-soprano, Janice Aikens, cross the stage animatedly and with great aplomb, much to the body-swaying delight of the clapping crowd. Renditions of "Amen" and "Every Time I Feel 'Da Spirit" elicited the same audience participation, but could not rival the soprano Veronica Lewis' version of "Go Tell It on the Mountain." Appropriately enough, Lewis hit notes higher than a mountain's peak, with enough expression and pure beauty to stand out as the evening's most memorable solo performance.

Lewis finished up the Harlem Spiritual Ensemble's set by taking the role of Sojourner Truth alongside Aikens' Harriet Tubman, in a medley entitled "Sisters of Freedom." Whether singing or basking in their lengthy standing ovation, it is clear that the members of the Harlem Spiritual Ensemble love every aspect of performance.

The radiant joy in the Ensemble's voices and on their faces revealed the audience in time for the debut of alumnus Peter Hamlin's '73 commissioned piece, "Reflections of the Sky." The Ensemble joined the College and Community Choirs to perform Vermont's contribution to the Continental Harmony Project. The project, a joint partnership of the American Composers Forum and the National Endowment for the Arts, has been debuting works all year long in each of the 50 states. Vermont's was a unique experiment in multiple texts and varied scores. It opened with a grating mix of improvised voices, each indistinguishable from the next. With a sweep of his hand, Maestro Clemmons transformed this discord into the words of Robert Pack's "Late Summer Purple." Middlebury alumna and writer-in-residence Julia Alvarez, Langston Hughes and Professor of English Jay Parini also contributed words to accompany Hamlin's score. Parini's refrains of "I Was There" hung majestically in the air and drew the attendees to their feet for the final time, reminding them all that they were all there to witness music history and a spirited addition to Middlebury's annals.