

Chicago Chorale at the Monastery of the Holy Cross

music



Chicago Chorale music director and conductor Bruce Tammen.

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Classical Music Critic

The Chicago Chorale's "Choral Music for Holy Week" was yet again another triumph for the young choir based here in Hyde Park. Too bad, then, that the two performances this weekend were both out of the neighborhood. I heard them Saturday night in a Bridgeport monastery that was a jewel box of sights and sounds. The soaring ceilings were visually dazzling and the soaring sound was a gift to the ear. And the Benedictine monks of the Monastery of the Holy Cross presided over a warm reception after the concert that brimmed with interesting conversation and smiling singers.

As followers of the Chicago Chorale have come to expect, conductor and artistic director Bruce Tammen constructed a splendid program of music representing a rich array of moods and periods.

The concert opened with Palestrina's "Sicut cervus desiderat" (Like as the Hart Desireth, Psalm 42). This miniature was magnificently performed with breathtaking phrasing, the music swelling with poignancy.

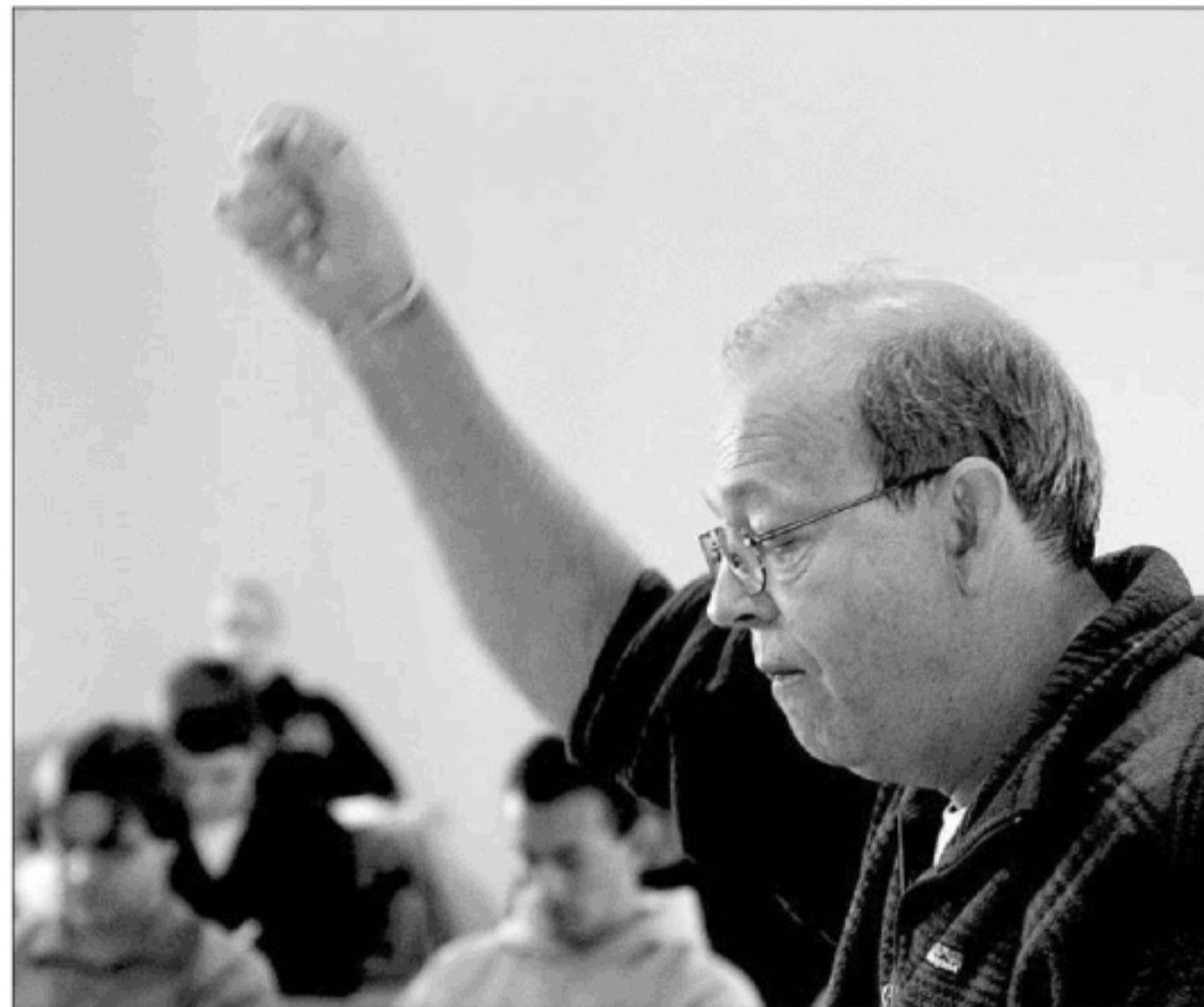
William Croft's "Hear my prayer, O Lord" was the only work that wasn't particularly gripping, although the singers gave it their all and effected a beautiful ending. Two excerpts from Herbert Howells's "Requiem" were finely etched. Bass soloist Timothy Graham had a voice that was firm, secure and persuasive. Tenor Samuel Gralla didn't have as much heft, but was pleasing.

Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings" is one of the 20th century's more elegiac and sorrowful works. Yet it also one of the most enduring. Tammen told me how hearing it in the days after Kennedy was assassinated has always resonated with him. Barber himself created the choral version, which is as hard on the singers (they are not violins, after all) as it is pleasing to audiences. The long arcs of sound were carefully shaped and the remarkably moving climax had the church fully awash in dramatic overtones.

A subset of the Chorale, a small chamber ensemble, stepped up to offer "Die mit Tränen säen" (He who Soweth Weeping) by Heinrich Schütz. The intimate, smaller sound provided a telling contrast to the full choir and this small group sang with conviction.

The highlight of the evening was the Mass for Double Chorus by the little-known Swiss composer Frank Martin, who died in 1974. Martin had his own musical idiom, and this work doesn't crackle with the kind of power Mozart or Verdi invested in their Requiems but rather it softly illuminates from within. The tense Kyrie gave way to a quietly moving Gloria. The Sanctus was almost erotically seductive, and ends in a huge, floating fortissimo. The concluding Agnus Dei juxtaposed a lyrical, hopeful cry to God over a solemn dirge. Elegant, accurate diction has always been a hallmark of the Chicago Chorale. While this space might not need quite the full attacking Ks and Cs the choir employed, there can be no quibbling about the effectiveness of the clear entrances, particularly in a work like Martin's, with so many different voice parts moving at different times. The Double Mass ends with the word "pacem" (peace) and the final M glided quietly about the room before fading into nothingness.

There were absolutely no musical disappointments in the performance. However, it's worth noting a few minor disappointments in other categories. First, the lighting provided for the singers in order to read their scores was of nearly laser strength and poked into audience eyes throughout the otherwise gentle church.



Bruce Tammen.

Second, there has always been debate on the difference between creation and imitation. Indeed, in the program notes to the Chicago Chorale's performance it was written, "Martin had a gift for immersing himself in styles of the past without seeming to imitate them." Ironically, these very remarks, and other parts of the program notes, appear verbatim, or with only the tiniest of deviations, in Alex Ross's 2001 "New Yorker" essay on Frank Martin. When I drew this to Tammen's attention, his response was immediate and decisive. "It absolutely took me by surprise. It is unacceptable and this won't happen again in the future," he told me.

Lastly, it is ridiculous that Hyde Park cannot provide a venue for this superb group made up of so many Hyde Parkers and whose audience is based in Hyde Park. Father Michael Mulhall of St. Thomas the Apostle made the journey to this charming monastery and after the performance offered Tammen use of St. Thomas for future performances. But St. Thomas needs physical adjustments to accommodate a large choir and it will take further negotiation to see if those adjustments can be easily made.

It really is a pity that the Chorale isn't singing at Rockefeller Chapel any longer. Few performing groups are able to fill that space and the Chorale has proven more than once that they can do just that.

The Chicago Chorale will appear on "Live from Studio One" on WFMT (98.7 FM) on Monday, April 16 at 8 p.m. They'll also perform in the Lake Forest College Lyrica Series on Sunday, April 22 at 3 p.m. For more information visit chicagochorale.org.