

The Chicago Chorale at Augustana Lutheran Church

music

By M.L. RANTALA
Classical Music Critic

What I like about the Chicago Chorale is that they give serious attention to serious music all the while convincing you that they are having great fun while doing it. The Chorale is a Hyde Park-based amateur choir lead by neighborhood local Bruce Tammen. Even amid snow flurries powdering already snowy streets and sidewalks, the group filled Augustana Lutheran Church Saturday night. This is a choir for whom you'll weather a storm.

Tammen created a rich, well thought out program of unaccompanied choral music that wasted no time in grabbing you by the throat. The opening work, the "Kyrie" from Frank Martin's "Mass for Double Choir" is a breathtakingly beautiful piece that the Chorale served up with haunting simplicity.

This set the stage for a world premiere, Judith Shatin's "Alleluia: In Memoriam, Firefighter Timothy Welty." Welty died on

Sept. 11, 2001, in the World Trade Center. I saw at least two local composers in the audience, Janice Misurell Mitchell and Patricia Morehead, presumably there in part to hear Shatin's new piece. It lends comparison to Randall Thompson's "Alleluia" for many reasons. Both Shatin and Thompson were on the faculty at the University of Virginia at the time they composed their "Alleluia." Each uses that single title word for its sole text. Neither is really a song of praise. Thompson, who in 1940 was awash with concerns about WWII, set his "Alleluia" to a doleful *lento tempo* and in discussion drew comparisons to the biblical Job. Shatin describes her work as "a blend of comfort and defiance, to sing against the dark, but in knowledge of it."

All that being said, and adding that Shatin's is the more complex work, it simply fails. Melodically, the emphasis on four notes of the Gregorian chant melody from the "Dies Irae" is unsatisfying. The greatest musical interest is in the shifting meter, but this is more jarring than pleasing. And her use of alleluia as the

sole text flops as either a stand-in for the Day of Judgment or for a meaningful memorial of death. Even so, new works, even new works that fail, sharpen the ear and it's great that Tammen gave it voice.

The rest of the program veered from old to new in a delightful musical ride back and forth among the centuries. Bach's "Komm, Jesu, komm" nestled neatly before Palestrina's "Canite tuba/Rorate coeli" from the Second Book of Motets. The former found the group ringing majestically through the chorale while the latter showed off their elegant phrasing even in the face of beautifully brisk pacing.

What was perhaps the loveliest music of the evening was a brace of Russian works. The Chorale displayed a remarkable oneness in Rachmaninoff's "Rejoice, O Virgin," while the same composer's "The Lesser Doxology" opened as a delicate web and swelled to a stirring rainbow of sound. Pavel Chesnokov's "Magnificat" opens slowly, and the piece takes a while to get under your skin. But the towering climax was realized perfectly and soprano soloist Tandra Black drew on her remarkable reserves to soar above the choir. Chesnokov's "Salvation is Created" had a sobering gravitas and ended with nimble rumbling in the basses.

"Jesu dulcis memoria" by the Swedish composer Otto Olsson highlighted the group's clarity and was enhanced by baritone soloist William Bennett's able singing.



Members of the Chicago Chorale led by Bruce Tammen.

There was a playful little work for organ, "Wachet Auf" by Emma Lou Diemer, performed nicely on the organ by Daniel Schwandt, as well as an ensemble of 16 members drawn from the Chorale who skillfully brought Heinrich Schultz's "In te, Domine, speravi" to life.

And there was a fine rendition of a piece by William Byrd, a lilting fugue by Brahms, and enormous sound in the concluding work by Bruckner. You got your money's worth and more.

The bonus prize was the charming reception hosted by the good people of the Augustana Lutheran Church. Wine and cheese, meatballs and punch, their fellowship room was full of good food, good drink, and good cheer.

The Chicago Chorale performs again in Hyde Park this spring when they bring the Bach B Minor Mass to Rockefeller Chapel at 7 p.m. on Apr. 8, 2006. For more information, visit chicagochorale.org.

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