

The Chicago Chorale at Rockefeller Chapel

music

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When Christmas Muzak gets to be too much, it's time for a real holiday concert. Those who made their way to Rockefeller Chapel Saturday night to hear Bruce Tammen and the Chicago Chorale certainly made a good choice. The program was headlined with Bach's "Magnificat," but the preceding short works were the highlight.

They started the evening at the back of the chapel in the choir loft and the sound that wafted down was simply marvelous. Francisco Guerrero's "Canite tuba ... Rorate caeli" had solemn beauty; its call to sound the trumpet spiritual rather than jubilant. "Dextera Domini" by Orlando di Lasso was luxuriant and ardent, with Tammen emphasizing the long lines. Bell-like tones characterized Pavel Chesnokov's "Bless the Lord, O my soul." The Russian was accurately articulated and the dramatic conclusion stunning.

The phrasing in Tomás Luis de Victoria's "Ecce Dominus veniet" grew as gracefully as a living thing. Similarly, there was wonderful unfolding in the "Ave Maria" by Franz Biebl. While there was some broadening of the sound in the soloists, the gentle uplifting music with its harmonic surprises deftly tucked in here and there were beautifully realized.

Tammen brought out the celestial sound of the "Pilgrims' Hymn" by Stephen Paulus and the otherworldliness of the "Sanctus" from Frank Martin's Mass in G for Double Chorus. The *a cappella* section of the program closed with the trim, uncluttered lines of one of Randall Thompson's most popular works, "Alleluia." Thompson infuses a reverence into this slow and somber work that he wrote just after the Germans had taken France during WWII. The Chorale's reverent pulse was simply perfect.

A small orchestra, with Jeri-Lou Zike as concertmaster, performed an interlude before the "Magnificat." Generations of television viewers have run to get their cup of cocoa when they hear Jean-Joseph Mouret's "Suite de Symphonies," knowing that Masterpiece Theater is about to begin. On Saturday night, it was during just this music that the Chorale left their heavenly perch and made their way to the front of the chapel. While the music is festive and pleasing, this reading was thin and lacking in definition, with the lower parts of the orchestra oftentimes missing in action.

The evening's performance closed with the work Bach composed for his first Christmas at Leipzig. The premier of the "Magnificat" took place in 1723 on Christmas day. Nearly 400 years later, it remains fresh and vital and the Chicago Chorale offered up a performance of power and majesty. The chorus was buoyant in "Von Himmel hoch, da komm ich her," where they were joined by the children of the Augustana Schola Cantorum Singers. "Sicut locutus est ad" was sung with excellent attention to detail, and "Gloria Patri, Filio," the work's conclusion, was rousing, with deft rhythmic force.

There was a battery of able soloists. Tandra Black's creamy soprano filled the chapel with her moving performance of "Quia respexit humilitatem." Tobias Saint-James had impressive low notes and shapely phrasing for the "Quia fecit mihi magna."

The orchestra wasn't up to the standard of the chorus, but the trumpets were jubilant and David Schrader's organ offered a fine underpinning for the proceedings.

The sound of the choir from their high perch in the gallery just can't be compared to the sound when they performed near the pulpit. But how do you shoehorn an orchestra up where the sound's the best?

It's been just a few years since Tammen returned to Hyde Park and formed the Chicago Chorale. In this short space of time it has become a potent force, drawing upon talented singers from our neighborhood and beyond. That Tammen is a fine musician and an asset to our community has been established in the many performances of the Chorale. Saturday night's concert, like their recent performance of Mozart's "Requiem," filled Rockefeller Chapel. But he also clearly inspires loyalty in his singers, who raise all the money needed to put on the performances and also engage in the tedious and sometimes tricky task of publicizing them.

If you missed this concert, don't despair. The Chicago Chorale will perform the Fauré "Requiem" on Saturday, Mar. 19 at 8 p.m. at St. Thomas the Apostle Church, 5472 S. Kimbark Ave.

And there's more holiday music coming to Rockefeller Chapel. The candlelight Christmas Eve service will feature music by members of the Rockefeller Chapel choir. The service is free and open to the public. It takes place on Friday, Dec. 24 at 4 p.m. at the chapel, 5850 S. Woodlawn Ave. For more information, call 702-9202.

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The Chicago Chorale with Bruce Tammen (front).



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