

Chicago Chorale at St. Thomas the Apostle Church

music

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Henry VIII is famous for having six wives (and dispatching two of them from the queen's throne by separating head from neck). Thomas Tallis (c.1505-1585) lived under almost as many monarchs as Bluff King Hal had wives—his lifetime spanned parts of every Tudor sovereign, being born before Henry VII died in 1509 and living nearly 30 years into Elizabeth's reign. Give him credit for fully five Tudors if you want to count the nine days that Jane Grey spent on the British throne, between the reigns of Henry's youngest child (Edward VI) and his oldest (Mary Tudor), before she, too, was bifurcated the hard way.

More important than the number of monarchs in the life of Tallis are the religious upheavals his kings and queens left in their wake. Tallis was born into an England strongly Catholic. During his life Catholicism was attenuated, brushed aside, openly defied, slyly accommodated, vigorously reinstated, and then marginalized, but without widespread persecution.

Tallis was a Catholic throughout all this and composed music in this ever-changing religious and political atmosphere, a time when

the Anglican liturgy was first taking form. These were confused times, yet Tallis did well. He and his most famous student William Byrd (a recusant Catholic who also prospered) shared a monopoly granted by Elizabeth for the publication of vocal music. But while Elizabeth may have tolerated and perhaps even encouraged the use of Latin in the Chapel Royal, Tallis's "The Lamentations of Jeremiah" was not likely written for the monarch. His most respected work (and probably his last) was believed to be composed for private Catholic chapels like that of Anthony Roper, Tallis's patron and grandson of Catholic martyr Sir Thomas More.



Chicago Chorale

The Chicago Chorale brought "The Lamentations of Jeremiah" to Hyde Park last week at a concert Saturday night in St. Thomas the Apostle Church. A large audience was offered a real musical treat.

In the original Hebrew the first verse of the biblical Lamentations begins with aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and each subsequent verse begins with the next Hebrew letter, in order, thus forming an acrostic. These introductory Hebrew letters Tallis sets for a quintet with music made up of extended, floating melismas. Against this, the main choir gets the actual biblical laments and

See **MUSIC** on page 19

MUSIC

from page 13

sings of atonement and repentance in a more syllabic setting. Letter and verse, Hebrew and Latin, Tallis creates a beautiful work of quiet drama and gentle counterpoint. Chicago Chorale artistic director Bruce Tammen led his forces in a performance that was richly textured and intense. While the quintet offered a competent but tentative performance that wanted more attention to filigree, the overall effect of the performance was moving, and the full choir harnessed the expressive nature of the work.

The other major work on the program was Fauré's "Requiem," a setting of the mass for the dead that eliminates the Dies Irae and Tuba Mirum and adds a Pie Jesu and In Paradisum. Fauré's unusual setting eschews wrathful howlings and instead creates an air of serenity and peacefulness. The Chicago Chorale provided a fine reading, singing with confidence and clarity. Baritone William Bennett was bold and sang with dedication. Soprano Jessica Jones has a delicate voice and performed with quiet

dignity. The orchestra, lead by concertmaster Jeri-Lou Zike, was the best to accompany the Chorale in some time. There were moments when voices and strings gleamed together, as in the Hosanna section of the Sanctus. Also, Thomas Weisflog on organ and Courtney Lawhn on harp joined with the choir in creating an ethereal, heavenly sound at the very end, as the choir sang of eternal rest.

Also on the program were a couple of short pieces. The Chorale emphasized the contemplative elements of "Like as the Hart" by Herbert Howells. Knut Nystedt's "O Crux" is a delightful study in color, opening on the note A and then expanding out on minor seconds before resolving into consonance. The Chorale exalted in both the music and the liturgical message.

The concert opened with a greeting by St. Thomas's pastor, Father Michael Mulhall, who, in a brief but fascinating address, told the audience a little bit about the church itself. It was built by Frank Lloyd Wright student and associate Barry Byrne and dedicated in 1924, making it the first modern Catholic

church in the U.S. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The concealed steel beams that hold up the roof make it possible to have a very large, uninterrupted worship space, completely without pillars. Father Mulhall made a point of highlighting 14 bas-relief sculptures by Alfeo Faggi which depict the stations of the cross. At the time they were installed, parishioners were not enamored of their simplicity, but now they are one of the reasons people make a point to visit the church. Faggi also created a Pieta that is displayed near the front of the church, which the artist described as "the complete unity of the two bodies and two spirits as the great sacrifice returns to its source." Seeing the body of Jesus melt into the body of Mary is fascinating. For more information on St. Thomas the Apostle Church, 5472 S. Kimbark Ave., call 324-2626.

The Chicago Chorale will be featured on WFMT's "Live from Studio One" on Monday, April 18 at 8 p.m. on 98.7 FM. For more information on the Chorale, call 667-4571, write info@chicago-chorale.org or visit chicagochorale.org.