

Chicago Chorale soars in Baltic and Scandinavian music

By Lawrence A. Johnson
chicagoclassicalreview.com

Saturday, Nov 19, 2011

Chicago is home to such a plethora of fine choral groups that it's sometimes hard to keep track of them.

Add the Chicago Chorale, now in its 11th season, to the roster of local ensembles that deserve to be much better known. Led by artistic director Bruce Tammen, the ensemble presented "Northern Light," a concert of 20th-century Scandinavian and Baltic sacred music Friday night at Hyde Park Union Church that for stylistic variety, polished vocalism, and depth of expression was a success across the board. (The program repeats 8 p.m. tonight at St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Lincoln Park and should not be missed.)



Lake near Inari, Finland.

The level of execution would have been impressive even coming from a professional chorus. Yet Tammen's singers are largely non-pros. There is a scattering of professional singers and music teachers but the 61 chorus members' occupations range from bookstore manager to physicist, banker, psychiatrist and interior designer. Perhaps some of the solo singing from chorus members wasn't quite on the same level as the ensemble yet under Tammen's dedicated direction the multivaried components largely sang as a single organic whole.

Tammen's calisthenic-like conducting style is somewhat unorthodox but he certainly gets results. In his brief introduction, Tammen joked that, being of Norwegian extraction, he took "full responsibility for this program," and that affinity for this

repertoire was clear in the bracing and idiomatic, often stunningly beautiful performances.

The largest work on the program was also the best known, Grieg's *Four Psalms (Fire Salmer)*. Written near the end of the Norwegian composer's life, these settings are his final masterpiece, closely wrought and imbued with a glowing yet clear-eyed and unsentimental expression.

The Chicago Chorale singers brought out the spiritual glow of *Hvad es du dog skjon* as well as the buoyant carol-like *Guds Son har gjort mig fri* with striking corporate finish and assurance. The meditative spiritual feeling of *Jesus Kristus or opfaren* was especially well done. The performance benefited greatly from baritone soloist Michael Cavalieri whose rounded tone and poised, flexible expression could not have been more communicative.

Tammen's program was both ambitious and adventurous taking us from Grieg up to Arvo Part. Yet his singers assayed the various challenging languages, including Norwegian, Swedish and Estonian, with extraordinary clarity and what sounded (to non-expert ears) like genuine idiomatic engagement.

The performances of the avant-garde works of Knut Nystedt were especially impressive. The Norwegian composer's take on Bach's *Come, sweet death (Komm, susser Tod)* conveys the somber beauty of the setting, here with the four sections of the chorus each deftly directed not by Tammen but by individual section leaders lending a spontaneity (and danger) to the music before a final homophonic reprise. Jan Sandstrom's *Gloria* is a small masterpiece of choral minimalism, and the group's performance brought out the Swedish composer's luminous beauty with a fine solo contribution by pure-voiced soprano Kaela Rampton.

The Chorale's sopranos handled the mercilessly exposed writing of Nystedt's *Audi* and *O crux* with aplomb, Tammen ensuring clarity in the overlapping writing, quick crescendoes and dizzying multipart writing. Three challenging excerpts from Rautavaara's *Vigilia* showcased the folk-like flavor.

Arvo Part's *Bogoroditse Djevo* is an atypical piece for the monastic minimalist, fast and carol-like in its folksy cheer and received a fresh and lively reading. Music of a younger Estonian Urmas Sisask, closed the evening with a *Benedictio* that built from alternating subterranean basses and high-flying soprano lines into a bravura showpiece, thrown off with great fervor, corporate polish and huge panache by Tammen and the Chicago Chorale.

The program will be repeated 8 p.m Saturday at St Vincent de Paul Parish in Lincoln Park. Th Chicago Chorale will also perform Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* with the Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest March 5 at Symphony Center. chicagochorale.org.