

## music

### There's something about Mary: Chicago Chorale at the Hyde Park Union Church

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Just in time to kick off the holiday season, Bruce Tammen, the artistic director of the Chicago Chorale, collected 16 a cappella works praising the Virgin Mary. They were presented under the title "A Rose in Winter" at the Hyde Park Union Church on Saturday.

The 60-voice Chicago Chorale was in fine form that night, even though Tammen himself, suffering from a recent fall, moved with a limp and had to conduct from something resembling a bar stool. He provided brief commentary for each piece, drawing the audience into the music and helping them listen appreciatively.

Particularly wonderful was their performance of "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming." This familiar Christmas carol, with the lovely harmonization composed by Michael Praetorius, was revisited by the Swedish composer Jan Sandström. He created a double choir version, with one group singing the Praetorius and a second, divided into eight parts, offering an accompaniment which Tammen described as the "musical soundscape of the Northern lights," but

which also unfolds as gently as a blooming rose. The chorale laid these two very different approaches together perfectly, with the music ever so gently settling on the ear.

"Kristallen den fina" by Gunnar Eriksson was given gorgeous treatment, with the different voice groups in the choir singing different melodies and texts with splendid clarity.

Benjamin Britten's "A Hymn to the Virgin" was composed when he was only 17 yet deftly combines two choirs, one singing in English, the other in Latin. The chorale exhibited exemplary dynamics and expressive, swelling phrasing.

There were two settings by Bruckner, beginning with "Virga Jesse Floruit" in the first half of the program and followed in the second half by his "Ave Maria." These works have the muscle you'd expect from that late Romantic composer. The first was rendered with passion and Tammen's guidance ensured impressive development as the piece unfurled, right down to the delicate murmuring of the concluding "Alleluia." The "Ave Maria" was full and rich and the singers offered nice details, including just the right amount of "N" in an "Amen" that shimmered throughout the church.

In Poulenc's opera, "Dialogues of the Carmelites," the nuns sing an "Ave Maria" before they are delivered to the

guillotine. The group performed a choral arrangement with the women singing the parts originally written for soloists and the men singing the orchestral accompaniment. Although brief and quiet, they communicated tremendous dignity and grace.

Henryk Gorecki's "Totus Tuus" was written to mark Pope John Paul II's third pilgrimage to Poland and is reminiscent of sections of his popular Symphony No. 3. The chorale drew out the bold colors and then slowly wound down to the quiet finale.

"Ave Maris Stella" by Otto Olsson was lyrical and Trond Kverno's work of the same title had a middle section with a marvelous pounding intensity.

Some of the oldest works were performed by a subset of the chorale, with ten members offering "Salve, sancta Parens" by William Byrd and eight singers tackling Josquin des Prez's "Ave Maria, Virgo Serena." These were

carefully sung, but came off as just a little thin.

The men of the choir were striking in their performance of Franz Biebl's "Ave Maria," with its surprising harmonies and enchanting overtones. Will Bouvel, Mike Byerly and Peter Olson were able singers in the work's trio.

Also on the program were the chants "Alma Redemptoris Mater" and "Magnificat Tone 2" showing off first the tenors of the choir and in the second case, the sopranos.

Earlier this year the Chicago Chorale gave a wonderful performance of the Rachmaninoff "Vespers," (now available on CD), and they brought back a couple of sections from that tremendous work. "Rejoice, O Virgin" was resonant and offered some "wow" moments. "To Thee, the Victorious Leader," Tammen pointed out, offers the Orthodox church's different view of Mary, seeing her as "the victorious leader of triumphant hosts." This music was exuberant, even frisky, and was a fitting piece to close the concert, which clocked in at just over 90 minutes without an intermission.