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Guarneri String Quartet, Chicago

Chorale, Chicago Ensemble

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Classical Music Critic

Hyde Park is a great neighborhood for classical music fans, and this past weekend was packed with music: the Guarneri String Quartet made a stop at Mandel Hall as part of their farewell tour, the Chicago Chorale opened their season at the Hyde Park Union Church and the Chicago Ensemble performed to one of their largest audiences ever at International House.

Violinists Arnold Steinhardt and John Dalley, violist Michael Tree and cellist Peter Wiley will disband the Guarneri String Quartet and retire at the conclusion of the 2008-09 season. Since 1964, when they first came on the music scene, they have developed an enthusiastic following and received critical acclaim. University of Chicago Presents gave Hyde Parkers a chance to hear them one last time, and there were no disappointments.

In Kodály's String Quartet No. 2 their seasoned musicality led to a performance of complex ideas rendered crisply and with beautiful transparency. Their rhythmic intensity was particularly noteworthy.

They offered understated depth in Mozart's String Quartet in D minor (K. 421) while deftly moving through all its intricacy. Their performance always pulsed with excitement without the distractions of put-on visual drama. This is an ensemble that knows how to let the music sing for itself.

Dvorák's "American" quartet was a moving conclusion to a fine evening. The quartet was fluid and nimble, with generous tonal quality and a very light touch. The cheers that



Guarneri String Quartet

followed brought the group back for two encores, excerpts from Mozart's K. 168. It was an enormously satisfying evening and a wonderful way to say goodbye.

The gap between the quality of professional musical groups and amateur ones tends to be large, for all the obvious reasons. But Bruce Tammen's Chicago Chorale is one of those really special non-professional groups that takes their work very seriously and yields joyful results. Sadly, an accident caused me to arrive late for their Saturday night performance in the Hyde Park Union Church. With so much other music to write about, I could have skipped the performance. But I always enjoy them. I couldn't simply go home.

music

The last half of the Mass in G Minor by Ralph Vaughn Williams displayed the calm steadiness of the group. The power of their musical tranquility was positively stirring. There was good work, too, by the quartet of soloists: Sharon Harris, Sammi Block, Bill McDougal and Luke Smetters.

The last work on their program was Schoenberg's "Friede auf Erden" (Peace on Earth). It was written just before the composer began working in the 12-tone method (what a more political music type might describe as a system that "spreads the notes around"). It had all the hallmarks of a Chicago Chorale performance: a lovely blending of voices, careful and articulate diction and controlled energy. For those who missed the performance, the chorale intends to record all the works on the program later this season.

Tammen has added his own spoken remarks, including little musical excerpts to listen for as a piece unfolds. It's a welcome innovation to their concerts.

The Chicago Ensemble's season got underway last month, but due to a scheduling glitch their first performance directly overlapped with the Hyde Park opening of the Mostly Music season. Director Gerald Rizzer tells me this won't happen again.

Their second program of the year highlighted diverse works and introduced one of this season's new members: violinist Matthias Tacke, formerly of the Vermeer quartet.

Composer Eric Moe was in the audience to hear the ensemble perform his 1997 work "Time Will Tell." Rizzer told us in advance it was devilishly difficult and frankly it sounds that way, too. Moe's interest in time — speeding it up, breaking it down — is evident in the pulsing music.

The most pleasant surprise of the afternoon was the 1952 trio by Marcelle de Manziarly. The composer was born in Russia before the revolution and studied in Paris. But she's obscure. Even Rizzer hadn't heard of her until very recently. The ensemble brought out the gauzy Frenchness of the work, as well as the playful rhythms and bouncy melodies. I'll keep my ears open for more music by this little-known composer.

The opening Trio-sonata in G Minor by Telemann was a bit heavy-handed, but the ensemble gave a persuasive reading of Hindemith's Quartet and a sure-footed performance of Mozart's Trio in E-flat Major (K. 498).



Dan Dry

Members of the Chicago Chorale