

# Leader of big voices returns to Hyde Park

by M.L. Rantala

**B**rUCE Tammen counts among his most profound musical inspirations the late Robert Shaw, the great American choral conductor. Tammen sang with Shaw for several years late in the conductor's life, captivated by the stunning chorale tone and sound Shaw achieved. Tammen uses many of Shaw's methods in his own conducting. He shuns the popular idea of the least common denominator: the use of the small voice. Instead, like Shaw, Tammen likes big, complex voices willing to conform to a uniform sound; voices that submit to the composer's intentions. "Sometimes it was Shaw's intentions," laughs Tammen.

Tammen, for twelve years the director of choral activities at the University of Chicago, has returned to Chicago after spending a few years at the University of Virginia's department of music. Last year he founded the Chicago Chorale, an amateur ensemble "in the best sense of the word—people who sing because they love it,"

## music review

according to Tammen. The group is composed largely of Hyde Parkers and University of Chicago alumni, but many other neighborhoods are represented as well.

Last Sunday they gave a recital at Hyde Park's First Unitarian Church entitled "Wondrous Love: Music for a Time of Penitence." With music from the 16th through the 20th centuries, Tammen created a program unified in mood though distinguished by contrasting musical styles.

The highlight of the program was Herbert Howells's *Requiem*, a brief, compact collection of small motets. Howells is particularly deft at setting English text, brilliantly matching the text lines to the musical ones. The Chicago Chorale sang with lustrous elegance, always accurately navigating the composer's surprising musical progressions. The several soloists were all charming, but

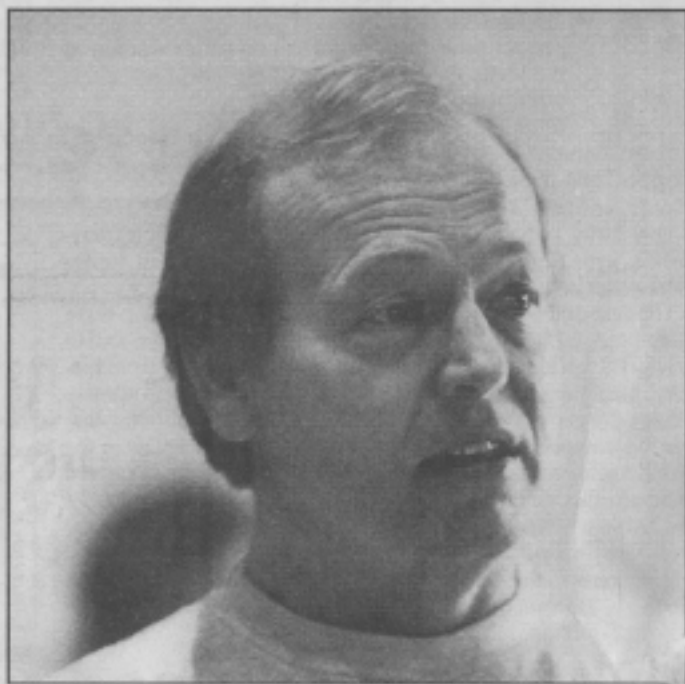
particularly notable were Tandra Black and Stephen Baker.

A lovely contrast to the Howells, with its unpredictable musical course, was the familiar territory of Bach. The Chorale's performance of "Ach Herr, lass dein lieb' Engelein," from the *Passion According to St. John* was well balanced and nicely articulated.

On the lighter side was "Wondrous Love," a compilation of hymns and songs arranged by Alice Parker and Robert Shaw sung with bounce and verve. Alexandre Gretchaninoff's "Chertóg Tvoy," a hymn of light, had powerful resonance but seemed slightly lacking in the bass rumblings so prominent in Russian music.

Tammen displayed his affinity for Bruckner in *Christus factus est*, following the inexorable logic of the music. The Chorale knew when to make the sound big and when to make it whisper.

The Chicago Chorale, founded in 2001, is a welcome new face in Chicago music.



Bruce Tammen, founder of the Chicago Chorale.

Their next Hyde Park concert will be June 2 at the Augustana Lutheran Church (55th and Woodlawn). The program will feature Grieg's *Four Psalms* as well as the work of Byrd, Messiaen, Brahms, Weelkes and Vaughan Willilams. For more information, visit their website: [chicagochorale.org](http://chicagochorale.org).

---

Like Robert Shaw, Bruce Tammen likes big, complex voices willing to conform to a uniform sound; voices that submit to the composer's intentions. "Sometimes it was Shaw's intentions," laughs Tammen.