

Voces Novae
 Concert could be too much of a good thing

By GEORGE HUBBARD • Nov. 19, 2001
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Voces Novae opened their ninth season yesterday afternoon at Church of the Ascension. Their concert lasted almost two hours, and that's a long time to sit on a church pew!

It's a long time to sing, too, and there were times when the voices sounded noticeably weary. Most of the selections were contemporary -- written since 1990 -- and many of them quite difficult. The singers responded to the direction of Frank Heller and Angela Hampton at every turn, but sometimes things were a bit of a scramble before turning out right.

In the sacred music half of the program, Sergei Rachmaninoff's "Bogoroditse Devo" ("Rejoice, O Virgin") was the most exciting number -- every nuance of the Russian liturgical style was carefully inflected, the basses rumbled wonderfully, and the great central climax practically took the roof off. (I wanted to shout "Stop now! You can't get any better!")

One wished that Heller had used about one-fourth of his chorus for Mozart's "Laudate Dominum." It sounded more like the Mormon Tabernacle than Salzburg Cathedral. Carrie Bohnert sang the florid soprano solo a bit too modestly, missing the inherent theatricality at the heart of the work.

The "Cantique de Jean Racine" by Gabriel Fauré was pleasant sounding, if a bit broadly realized for such a delicate text. The chorus' diction of the French text was quite clear, which is no mean feat, but one would never have mistaken them for Francophones.

"How Lovely Are Thy Dwellings" from Brahms' "A German Requiem," sung in English, was pretty blah. Even the big fugal climax of the piece failed to excite. Henryk Górecki's "Totus Tuus" has been heard quite a bit over the last 10 years, and it's getting pretty stale. Paul Hume once characterized a work as "somewhat longer than its better parts;" he could have been talking about this one.

There were three sure winners in the concert's secular portion, "Sing Me to Heaven" by Daniel Gawthrop, "Prelude to Peace" by Z. Randall Stroope, and "There Will Be Rest" by Frank Ticheli. All were beautifully performed, and one would be hard-pressed to say which was best.

Gwyneth Walker's "Love Is a Rain of Diamonds," sung by the women, was delightful and filled with interesting textures.

Closing the program was an old favorite, Randall Thompson's

"Choose Something Like a Star" from his "Frostiana" suite. Here the chorus was assured and confident and pulled from their last reserves to end the concert on a high note indeed.