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Voces Novae
Spiritual tradition proves explosive

By ANDREW ADLER • June 3, 2002
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Frank A. Heller III hurled a few thunderbolts during last night's season-closing program by Voces Novae, the chorus he's spent nine years honing into a precision instrument of collective song. In performances at Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church in Jeffersonville, Ind., conductor and ensemble spent a solid hour exploring the American spiritual tradition sifted through two generations of composers and arrangers.

If there had been any rafters inside the modern sanctuary, they surely would have been ringing as Voces strutted its heady stuff. Coming not long after the chorus participated in a remarkable account of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Louisville Orchestra and three fellow choral ensembles, last night's results testified to the mutual commitment of singers and their director. Great material, great musicianship, great fun.

With a vast repertoire to choose from, Heller made a logical organizational decision. The initial pieces focused on the once-removed perspectives of composers born in the 19th or early 20th centuries -- people like Jester Hairston, William Levi Dawson and Hall Johnson -- moving then to such younger exponents as Andre J. Thomas and Keith Hampton. That way, listeners could appreciate the thematic evolutions (and immovable constants) defining this rich and resonant material.

Readily coping with whatever quality of attack, texture or dynamic emphasis was required, the chorus made every idiom its own. A piece like Jack Halloran's "Witness," led by outgoing Assistant Artistic Director Angela Vaughn Hampton, turns on the lightness of exchange among choral sections, and the confidence to press forward when an unexpected harmony emerges. The account was completely right in its proportions, setting a standard that would grow only more impressive.

A pair of guest vocalists, soprano Annie Cain Bolden and tenor Michael Bolden, joined the choir for several selections plus a sprinkling of numbers on their own. His direct, sincere approach melded particularly well in "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," which can easily sound like an exhausted cliché but which he crafted into a brilliant reaffirmation. Her voice, wrapped in a husky outline that tended to hover around the pitch, was less satisfying except when ringing out extreme dynamics above the staff.

No compromises, however, imperiled the chorus. When the singers really got going, as in Moses George Hogan's "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," the energy was explosive.