

Voces Novae

A program for the ages with a stunning, giddy climax

BY MARTY ROSEN · Nov. 26, 2002 The Courier-Journal

Midway through their season-opening program, "Resounding Together In This Hallowed House," at Christ Church Cathedral last night, the superb choir Voces Novae offered up Anton Bruckner's "Locus Iste." The Latin text translates: "This place was made by God; a priceless holy place, it is without fault."

Indeed.

The cathedral was the perfect setting for an evening of moving, perfectly honed a capella sacred music that spanned centuries, languages and nations, and celebrated the accomplishments of one of Louisville's most treasured musical institutions.

The concert began with the ancient comforts of a medieval chant, sung by a choir of men arrayed around the room, permitting listeners to hear both the individual voices nearest them and the calming blend of the choir. Two selections, one a 20th century piece by German composer Franz Biebl, the other by Volckmar Leisring, a 17th century German, were sung by a split choir, men at the rear of the sanctuary, women at the front. The interplay of buttery male and shimmering female voices across the length of the room perfectly distilled the timeless simplicity of Biebl's "Ave Maria."

William Byrd's "Haec Dies" and Palestrina's "Sicut Servus" found the choir together on stage for two masterworks of Renaissance polyphony.

Giacomo Carissimi's 17th century "Plorate Fillii Israel" was a challenging piece, with a strikingly counterintuitive bass line and a remarkable transitional passage that began with the tenors creating the thin edge of a musical wedge that gradually expanded into a glimmering crescendo.

Franz Schubert's "Christ ist Erstanden" showcased the choir's power with romantic repertoire. Under Director Frank Heller, the massed voices had the intensity of a masterful singer of lieder, sometimes sounding breathy and ominous, then suddenly husky and muscular.

The final selection, René Clausen's "All That Hath Life and Breath," was stunning. In one passage, as the lower voices sustain a chord, the sopranos pipe up, one by one, creating a giddy, chaotic chatter as moving as anything in the choral literature.