

Voces Novae

A decade of choral hits are winningly performed

By **ANDREW ADLER** · May 20, 2003

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We should all have a few nights like Frank A. Heller III had on Sunday with his choral ensemble Voces Novae. Performing highlights from the group's 10-year history, he provided one vivid testimony after another of how to connect powerfully with listeners through the human voice.

Sensational isn't too strong an adjective for several of the renditions these singers gave at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Jeffersonville, Ind. Aided by a near-ideal acoustic for choral repertoire -- just live enough to fill the space with sound, but not too resonant that articulation was sacrificed -- the entire experience emphasized the way Heller's been able to motivate his choristers. The guy has a gift for people as much as he does for music.

Voces Novae has covered quite a bit of stylistic territory since it was established in 1993. Much of its material has a spiritual component, even when the subject matter is ostensibly purely objective. And when the religion of some sort comes to the foreground, Heller is happily interfaith. He's just as apt to embrace Jewish vocal literature as Christian, just as long as it's great stuff.

Sunday his chorus opened in splendid fashion with Randall Thompson's "The Last Words of David," and kept their prime focus all the way through Mark Hayes' crackling arrangement of "Go Down, Moses" nearly two hours later. In between came several genuine stunners - most extraordinarily, Louisvillian David L. Cross's brilliant cross-genre "Gloria," René Clausen's "In Pace," Z. Randall Stroope's brooding and explosive "Lamentations of Jeremiah" and William Levi Dawson's setting of "Soon-Ah Will be Done."

Whatever Heller and these composers asked for, his singers gave. Their tonal balance, intuitive sense of rhythm, and their ability to sustain long lines and dynamic extremes without coarsening, were exceptionally satisfying. Whether on their own, or partnered by their insightful and responsive pianist, Deanne Hardy, their accomplishments served each work with nary a misstep.

Most of all, Heller and his colleagues had a fine time, and more than anything they wanted their listeners to share those happy sentiments. This may sound a bit simplistic, yet too many performers seem to demand a kind of rigorous exactitude from patrons. Voces Novae goes right for the heart.

And if occasionally that heart could be a little marshmallow soft - as in selections like Daniel Gawthrop's "Sing Me to Heaven" or David L. Brunner's "O Music" -- the honesty of Heller's interpretations were never in doubt. Indeed,

the precision, restraint and plush delivery were seductive enough to render objections into quibbles.

A few very familiar numbers came up surprisingly fresh. The Robert Shaw/Alice Parker arrangement of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," for instance, was conservative in its fundamentals yet so gorgeous that one couldn't help lean forward and take notice. Similarly, James Erb's take on "Shenandoah" began rather thinly for divided sections of the chorus, then broadened, into a majestic wash of sonority, for the full ensemble.

Ten years is not a terribly long time in the grand musical scheme of things, even locally. But Heller and Voces Novae have made a considerable impact here. We should all be grateful -- and continue to listen.