

Voces Novae offers a superb showcase of American music

By MARTY ROSEN · November 24 2003

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Voces Novae offered a resounding kickoff to Thanksgiving week yesterday afternoon with an exquisite performance of music by American composers.

And the audience at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Jeffersonville, Ind., had plenty of reasons for gratitude.

Under conductor Frank Heller III, Voces Novae has developed into a brilliant chorus with an eclectic, intelligent repertoire, a trove of fine soloists, and a rare level of technical proficiency. And yesterday's performance was yet another confirmation of the group's power to move.

The centerpiece of the program was Leonard Bernstein's 1988 "Missa Brevis." The clangor of bells and drums (from percussionists Sam Harris, Mark Tate, and Brian Kushmaul) infused the concise piece with a raucous joy that threw into sharp relief the searing intensity of "Kyrie's" subtle opening crescendo, the jagged entrances and unsettling intervals of the perplexing "Gloria," and the limpid, soaring elegance of Tiffany Taylor's solo singing.

This was a masterful ensemble giving a masterpiece its due.

Z. Randall Stroope's "Sure On This Shining Night," featuring soloist Sarah Nettleton, was full of plush, shimmering harmonies, their transparency as demanding and dangerous as they were beautiful.

Time and again Heller teasingly pulled his choir up the slope in tantalizing crescendos, then turned them back, before finally unleashing the full power of his concerted forces in a glowing climax.

René Clausen's "Psalm 100," with its call to "make a joyful noise," was a rhythmic tour de force accompanied by two pianos (the group's usual accompanist Deanne Hardy plus Joey Sutherland) and percussion (Tate on drums and Harris on marimba).

"Set Me As A Seal," Richard Nance's setting of a text from the "Song of Solomon" coupled the haunting sound of Laura Floyd's French horn with sharply delicate singing that uncoiled first in easy arches, then became a flickering, pulsing patchwork quilt of sound, puffing up in rippling gasps.

Even rigorous, heartfelt performances couldn't redeem "What Is a Heart?" by Dede Duson or "If Love Should Count You Worthy" by James Quitman Mulholland of their overly decorous conventionality.

But "O Nata Lux," an a cappella setting by Morten Johannes Lauridsen, was a hushed marvel of profound choral singing. As was a riveting "O Captain! My Captain," John Leavitt's setting of Walt Whitman's grief-stricken memorial to

the assassinated Abraham Lincoln, which featured a penetrating baritone solo from Jeremy Kelly.

Two closing pieces made a nice matched set: Daniel E. Gawthorp's setting of Francis Quarles' "Close Now Thine Eyes," was a warm and comforting lullaby.

It was followed by Moses George Hogan's "Walk Together, Children," a rousing spiritual exhortation to "Sing, and never tire!"

It's an exhortation Voces Novae should take to heart.