

## Voces Novae

### Ensemble takes spiritual journey

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By **ANDREW ADLER** · March 8, 2004

aadler@courier-journal.com

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For Frank A. Heller III, every concert describes a small journey of inner space. Voces Novae, the chorus he trains and nurtures season after season, looks first to the spirit present within each of its singers, and by extension his audiences. It's no exaggeration to call Heller's perspective a pan-theistic, summoning faiths of all persuasion to share his listening ground.

Yesterday's concert by the ensemble demonstrated those imperatives with characteristic succinctness. Titled "Choral Portraits," the Church of the Ascension program sampled works by Gerald Cohen, Eleanor Daley and Eric Whitacre - acknowledging traditions of Jewish, Christian and humanist beliefs, often embracing the notion that there's something bigger than ourselves out there.

It helps that his choristers sing at a very high level. Yesterday the ensemble was vigorous crisp, with telling diction whether texts were in English or Hebrew. Heller knows how to coax a sound from his colleagues that is blended elegantly from top to bottom without ever sounding homogenized. His singers don't appear to strain at the notes - they simply hit them, remaining supple when very soft or very loud, when textures thicken or vocal lines intersect.

Heller spent a good deal of his concert speaking about vocal color, exemplified in pieces like Whitacre's "Water Night" and especially the composer's arresting "Sleep." The latter work, employing texts by poet Charles Anthony, putters along for a few minutes rather unremarkably, then suddenly grabs the listener in a flurry of dense, explosive dynamics that close with an eloquent whisper.

Throughout the program one was struck by Voces Novae's accomplished baritones and basses, and how their rich contributions were seamlessly integrated with the balance of the ensemble. The chorus' men gave a confident, sonorous account of Daley's "The Stars are with the Voyager," with Jerry Amend's roundly hued solo trumpet underpinning the entire chorus in Daley's "For the Fallen." "There is music in the midst of desolation," speaks its opening phrase, and so was the authentic sentiment that emerged.

David A. Lipp, cantor of Louisville's Congregation Adath Jeshurun, was the stylistically idiomatic soloist in several pieces by Cohen - himself a cantor in suburban New York. "Hinei Mah Tov/Sh'alu Sh'lom Y'rushalayim" mingled texts from Psalms 133 and 122 to luscious effect. Later on, three brief movements from Cohen's Passover cantata "And You Shall Tell Your Child" articulated its intergenerational narrative through utterly simple means.

Clarinetist Dallas Tidwell and cellist Wendy Doyle were welcome participants as well; pianist Deanne Hardy was the afternoon's skilled sympathetic accompanist. But it was the chorus, inevitably and rightly, that captured principal honors of the day. "Dayeinu!" declared yesterday's finale - "Enough!" Well, after a bare hour's worth of music, I wasn't thinking "dayeinu" - I wanted more, more and more.