

Tuesday, May 24, 2005

Heller's Voces Novae sing with conviction

MUSIC REVIEW Voces Novae

By Andrew Adler

Courier-Journal Critic

Frank A. Heller III and his Voces Novae ensemble have spent this season in a refracting mode. Their "Prisms" concert series, which ended the season Sunday afternoon at Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church in Jeffersonville, Ind., turned on the conceit of emotional filtering: first "Light," then "Love" and finally, "Life."

Heller is a fundamentally affirming soul, and Sunday's program offered his now-familiar emphasis on works that connect directly to the heart. His chorus sang with skill and conviction, even when challenged to bend in unconventional fashions. Listeners may have wondered what the group was up to in Australian Sarah Hopkins' "Past Life Melodies," which summoned up sound imagery of Aboriginal hum-chant and the didgeridoo, but Voces' bit of vocal theater was undeniably compelling.

So was the chorus' exceptional account of Rhonda Sandberg's "Come Sweet Death," an arrangement of J.S. Bach's "Komm, Suesser Tod, Komm Sel'ge Ruh" (S. 478) that closed with each chorister deciding which tempo to sing. The acoustical effect, enveloping the church in one wave after another, was quietly spectacular.

I was less enthralled with the presentation of Vincent Persichetti's "Celebrations," settings from nine of Walt Whitman's poems from "Leaves of Grass." Scored for chorus and a large wind ensemble, the piece is crafted with the composer's knowing ear, yet for me it seldom escapes its determined earnestness. One couldn't help observing that "Flaunt Out O Sea" was set to far better ends by Vaughan Williams in "A Sea Symphony," even discounting having a full orchestra at his disposal. Still, Sunday's performance was capably managed, and Heller deserves credit for assembling the necessary forces and doing them reasonable justice.

Elsewhere Robert L. Boozman, Voces' associate artistic director, anchored Norman Dello Joio's "A Jubilant Song" on piano and conducted an appropriately clear-headed performance of the Shaker hymn "The Gift To Be Simple," arranged by Bob Chilcott. John Tavener's "Song for Athene," hardly among this composer's more persuasive efforts at vocal minimalism, benefited from Heller's gentle urgency.

As he has in the past, Heller also touched on current wartime circumstances via Eleanor Daley's "For the Fallen," including an extended trumpet solo by Louisville Orchestra principal J. Jerome Amend. Life was affirmed and death

acknowledged, looking straight ahead.