

Monday, March 5, 2007

MUSIC REVIEW

## Choir and pianist unite to delight

By Marty Rosen - Special to The Courier-Journal

Voces Novae jammed yesterday at the Church of the Ascension. Under director Frank A. Heller III, the choir is justly respected for the moving rigor of performances from medieval chant to contemporary experimentalism.

Yesterday's program, "Portraits -- The Many Facets of Harry Pickens," found the choir collaborating with the Louisville-based composer/pianist/educator on a delightful program that stretched their voices in new directions -- scat singing and Sufi spiritualism, classical voicings, New Age harmonies and jazz rhythms.

The first half of the program focused on control. Pickens' settings of Cummings' "i carry your heart," and "Deus Caritas Est" were textbook examples of clear, accessible choral writing, carefully shaped and perfectly delivered.

A short text by the Persian poet Rumi, "With Passion, Pray," elicited a more idiosyncratic setting, including a comically nasal delivery of the line, "Why look like a dead fish in this ocean of God?"

For a Wendell Berry text, "When I Rise Up," Pickens composed the most exciting pure choral music of the concert, a careful massing of sound that culminated in a stunning tangle of peals and twitters as delicate as nature itself.

The second half featured varied improvisational techniques. Accompanied by bass (Chris Fitzgerald), drums (Jason Tiemann), and Pickens on piano, the choir swung through "VN Blues," a coiling bop melody that featured lighthearted scat singing by several choristers. Four fine soloists (sopranos Jennifer Kovalcik and Tiffany Taylor, and altos Deborah Sachs and Christie Tompkins) led a Motown-influenced piece of call-and-response social activism called "The People Want Peace."

"Circlesong," inspired by vocalist/composer Bobby McFerrin, found the choir circling the sanctuary while Pickens led the entire assembly through a simple, hauntingly beautiful collective improvisation on the words "love and gratitude."

But for haunting beauty, nothing could surpass soprano Sarah Nettleton's extraordinary introduction to "Hole In A Flute," a text by the Persian mystic Hafiz.