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Chicago Chamber Choir sings in Northbrook

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Last Modified: Mar 20, 2012 08:48PM

The stirring choral work “Lux Aeterna” by Morten Lauridsen will be performed by the Chicago Chamber Choir Sunday afternoon, accompanied by the Evanston Symphony Orchestra.

The 40-voice choir sang the work as part of the Evanston Symphony Orchestra’s subscription concert March 11, and those fortunate enough to attend that program heard a choir of exceptional flexibility and beauty.

Their Northbrook program also includes madrigals, contemporary works and spirituals, including the music of Josquin des Prez, Charles Wood, John Rutter, Eric Whitacre and Moses Hogan.

Light and hope

“This program is built around the theme of fire and light,” said the choir’s director Timm Adams. “‘Lux Aeterna’ is a transcendent choral piece that Lauridsen wrote after his mother’s passing. It is full of comfort and hope.”

Lauridsen is professor of composition at the University of Southern California’s Thornton School of Music and wrote the work for the Los Angeles Master Chorale when he was composer-in-residence there.

“I love to work with living composers,” Adams declared, adding that Lauridsen’s “Lux Aeterna” never fails to have an emotional impact on him when he hears it.

The CCC is now in its 16th season and Adams has been its music director since 2000. “Our membership of 40 voices is a little larger than a true chamber choir,” he explained. “It is an all-volunteer group, so when we do our outreach programs we can do them with about half a choir.”

Outreach includes a cappella concerts at inner-city schools, retirement homes, homeless shelters and rehabilitation centers. “For about a dozen years we have been singing on Thanksgiving Day at the homeless shelter north of Howard Street,” he said. “It is one of our most rewarding programs.”

Concert themes

Adams’ three subscription programs — fall, holiday and spring — reflect his spirit of showmanship. “I’ve done a choral series on the elements, earth, air, water, and fire over the past four years,” he said. “Our spring program in Northbrook reflects the theme of fire and light.”

Joanna Tomassoni is an alto in the choir, which she joined just last September. “I grew up in music,” she said. “My parents met in a choir. I had piano lessons and then played the clarinet.”

She sang in the Kenyon College choir all four years. After graduation she moved to Chicago and immediately

began searching for choirs. “I started with Google,” she said, laughing, and in short order she joined the Wicker Park Choral Singers, the large Apollo Chorus, and La Caccina, a new women’s a cappella group, named for the Baroque composer Francesca Caccini, a woman who wrote in the Medici court.

“And I found the Chicago Chamber Choir,” she said. “I liked the size and the emotional focus of the group. I listened to their recordings and knew it was a skilled choir.”

She has been impressed, not only with the clarity of Timm Adams conducting, but with the quality of her choral colleagues. “Plus, our repertoire is not all from one period,” she added. “We’ll sing a Renaissance piece and then a Gospel song.”

Fellow alto Tracy Weisman is now in her 11th season with the choir and served as the CCC’s board president for seven years.

“I love the experience of coming together in the choir, the artistic collaboration,” she said, “taking part in something greater than yourself. And Timm’s programs are not only interesting and diverse. He takes us out of our comfort zone.

“He views a choral concert as a visual and aural experience for the audience,” she continued. “For our fall concert we all wore Halloween costumes. It was a so much fun.”

Weisman sang in choirs during high school and all through her four years at Brown University. “The human voice is so amazing and capable of so much, from the softest pianissimo to the fiery madrigals,” she said.

Weisman, in fact, was instrumental in the collaboration between the choir and the Evanston Symphony. She and Penelope Sachs, a member of the orchestra’s viola section, had been personal friends when both their husbands worked at Leo Burnett advertising agency.

At one point the women thought that their two musical groups should do something together. They introduced their respective music directors and the March concerts are the result.

Working together

“Collaborations always provide an opportunity for multiple performances,” explained Lawrence Eckerling, conductor of the Evanston Symphony, “and when I heard the Chicago Chamber Choir do the Lauridsen, I was taken away.”

Eckerling conducted the orchestra and chorus on March 11 in Pick-Staiger and Adams will conduct the chorus and members of the Evanston Symphony on March 25 at Our Lady of the Brook in Northbrook. “Timm is a superb conductor and musician,” Eckerling said, “and it will be a unique experience for both groups to work with two different conductors on the same piece.”

Weisman, like Tomassoni, is enthusiastic about the emotional connection the choir forms with its audience. She cites “Lux Aeterna” as an example. “It is an emotional journey,” she said, “from doubt and uncertainty to faith and peace. We hope the the audience will be with us on that journey.”