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VAE brings warmth and light to gloomy day

Concert review

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Some things just have class.

One of them is the Vocal Arts Ensemble led by music director Earl Rivers. The holiday season - any season - would be much poorer without them, as they demonstrated at their annual holiday concert Sunday afternoon at St. Peter in Chains Cathedral.

Joined by guest artists the Canterbury Brass Quintet and the Jubilate and Lyric Choirs of the Cincinnati Children's Choir, the 24-voice ensemble brought warmth and light to a day so chill and foggy you could scarcely make out the skyline in downtown Cincinnati.

Rivers, director of choral studies and head of the division of ensembles and conducting at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, completes a distinguished 20-year career with the VAE this season, and the concert offered one more opportunity to hear him conduct music that is close to his heart. (He and the VAE have recorded two CDs of Christmas music, available on the VAE Web site at www.vaecinci.org.)

Giving the concert a personal touch, members of the VAE introduced each segment of the five-part program, which comprised a cappella works from the Renaissance to the present, three pieces for Canterbury Brass alone, a unit for the VAE and the Canterbury Brass, selections by the guest choirs and a final set for combined choirs and brass.

Rivers opened on a contemporary note with two of Frank Ferko's colorful Marian Motets (Ferko is former composer-in-residence with the Dale Warland Singers) and Eric Whitacre's sublime "Lux Aurumque." Both demonstrated the carefully honed balance and precision of the VAE, whose voices floated angelically through the cathedral's imposing, column-lined sanctuary. The two Canterbury trumpeters on piccolo trumpet added their voices to baroque composer Samuel Scheidt's "In dulci júbilo," performed in quasi-surround sound by the choir, arranged in four groups in a semi-circle at the head of the nave.

A highlight of the concert was "E la don don, Verges Maria," an anonymous Spanish "villancico" (stanzas separated by a refrain) sung as the choristers strolled the aisles of the cathedral. A poetic beauty from a later age, "The Time Draws Near the Birth of Christ" from Alfred Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam" set to nostalgic music by Canadian Allan Bevan in 2002 and accompanied by pianist Christina Haan, closed the first section of the program.

The Canterbury Brass Quintet, winner of the prestigious Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition in 1997, produced some natural surround sound in a Dance Suite from Michael Praetorius' "Terpsichore" (1612) and the carols, "The Holly and the Ivy" and "O Come Emmanuel" arranged by Derek Holman, their lines crisscrossing sonorously in the cathedral's reverberant acoustic.

The Brass men then joined the VAE in Holman's lively arrangement of the French carol "Il est ne le divin enfant" and "The Twelve Days of Christmas" in a delightfully updated version by Howard Cable. The gifts that sequentially pile up in the familiar song take the form of musical excerpts from "my CD," including (among others) Purcell's Trumpet Tune ("perhaps by Jeremiah Clarke"), Haydn's Trumpet Concerto, Rossini's "William Tell" Overture, Tchaikovsky's "1812" Overture, some "wah" wah" trombone from Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" and Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man."

Two more a cappella works followed intermission, John Tavener's Russian Orthodox-influenced "Ikon of the Nativity" about the mystery of the incarnation and Aaron Jay Kernis' lovely Portuguese lullaby "Dorma ardor" (2000) with mezzo-soprano soloist Angeline Wheeler.

Directors Kathleen Maguire and Robyn Lana took charge of the Jubilate and Lyric Choirs, respectively, in a pair of charming miniatures, David Brunner's "Winter Changes" and Eleanor Daley's "The Sugarplum Tree." Maguire led the combined choirs in the traditional Hebrew "Hashivenu" ending on a mellifluous major triad.

In conclusion, Rivers led the entire company in "O Christmas Tree," a joyful noise that enveloped the crowd. He invited listeners to sing along in "Deck the Halls" - the "fa, la, las," that is - directing a brief "rehearsal" beforehand to assure quality for the concert's broadcast repeat at 7 p.m. Dec. 19 on WGUC-FM (90.9).

He sent them home with a smile, a wave and a bright, seasonal "We Wish You a Merry Christmas."