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VocalEssence choir party a perfect pitch

By **Rob Hubbard**
Special to the Pioneer Press
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Minnesota is choral country. The state is overflowing with so many talented choirs that it would take years for the average music lover to hear them all at least once.

But there was an opportunity to catch up with eight of them at once Sunday afternoon. In honor of its 40th anniversary, VocalEssence hosted something of a choir party at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. In addition to the VocalEssence Chorus and Ensemble Singers, six other choirs each performed two tunes, one of them showing off a specialty of that group, the other something originally premiered by VocalEssence.

The result was a splendid celebration of the region's choral traditions and talent. But, even though all the choirs amassed onstage for the premiere of a new work by Dominick Argento, the quietest moments of the concert proved most transporting. Delicacy and restraint combined with rich harmonies to take listeners to those places you can reach only through the power of the human voice.

For example, central Minnesota's Kantorei drew listeners into a mood of calm reflection with a prayer by Dag Hammarskjold, set to music by Eskil Hemberg. And the group with the shortest history on the program, the Singers, served up a reminder of the gifts of local composer Stephen Paulus through a slice of his "Meditations of Li Po."

Inviting all of these choirs to perform set VocalEssence up to be upstaged. And the National Lutheran Choir may have done that. Charismatic conductor David Cherwien and his

group sang a piece by Eric Whitacre that captured the essence of what makes that composer's music so marvelous ... maybe more than anything performed on VocalEssence's recent all-Whitacre program. And the National Lutheran Choir's version of Moses Hogan's "The Battle of Jericho" demonstrated that it understand where gospel intersects with the blues and that Lutherans can, indeed, get funky.

But the VocalEssence Ensemble Singers seized the spotlight with a dark and deeply involving new work by Judith Bingham, featuring an arresting solo by alto Krista Palmquist.


When the choirs combined for Argento's "The Choirmaster's Burial," the pure power of this 500-voice group could have been overwhelming had it not handled the work with such gentleness. When a hymn, "Mount Ephraim," emerged from amid the tune and gathered strength, it sparked an electricity eclipsed only by the singalong finale of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Rob Hubbard can be reached at


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