



Everybody sang



Stephen Maturen, Dml -

Phillip Brunelle conducts as part of "Everybody Sings," celebrating the 40th anniversary of VocalEssence at Orchestra Hall.

For its 40th-season grand finale, VocalEssence showcased itself along with six other Twin Cities choruses.

By **WILLIAM RANDALL BEARD**, Special to the Star Tribune

Last update: May 4, 2009 - 2:57 PM

Ironically, the VocalEssence Chorus & Ensemble Singers were almost inconspicuous during the finale of their 40th-anniversary concert season, "Everybody Sing!" heard

Sunday afternoon at Orchestra Hall. Instead, VocalEssence artistic director Philip Brunelle chose to shine a spotlight on six other Twin Cities choruses.

Much of the repertoire, however, was a celebration of VocalEssence's rich performance history, including some of the 130-plus works the organization has commissioned.

The chamber ensemble Kantorei, conducted by Axel Theimer, brought a crystalline sound to "Thou Who Art Over Us," commissioned from Eskil Hemberg, offering a deeply felt version of a simple but moving hymn.

The Singers, under Matthew Culloton, excelled in Stephen Paulus' "... and now the last cloud drains away," from "Meditations of Li Po." They sang with clarity, making the complex tonalities, befitting the work's Chinese origins, transparent.

David Cherwien's National Lutheran Choir rocked the house with an arrangement of "The Battle of Jericho" by Moses Hogan that had been given its Midwest premiere by VocalEssence.

Magnum Chorum, under Christopher Aspaas, were less successful with "Agnus Dei" from

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"The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass," commissioned from Carol Barnett. Their rendition was overly stiff and lacking in energy.

Minnesota Chorale and conductor Kathy Saltzman Romey dazzled with "As From the Pow'r of Sacred Lays" from Handel's "An Ode for St. Cecilia's Day." Theirs was a stately, yet passionate rendition that nodded to VocalEssence's early history,

Of interest in the Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus' set was "I Want More Life" from "Angels in America: Part II," which they had commissioned from Michael Shaieb for the Guthrie Theater's Tony Kushner celebration. Under conductor Stan Hill, the Chorus' full-throated performance built to a life-affirming cry.

Brunelle and the VocalEssence Chorus & Ensemble Singers hampered themselves with the choice of "Agnus Dei" by Sven-David Sandström. They delivered a stellar performance of a rather uninteresting work.

The Ensemble Singers hit the mark with the U.S. premiere of "The Drowned Lovers" and "The Bluebird" by Judith Bingham, two pieces juxtaposed to bring a dark tale vividly to life.

The finale featured all the groups in the world premiere of "The Choirmaster's Burial" by Dominick Argento, composed for the occasion. As conducted by Brunelle, it was a charming piece setting a sweet poem by Thomas Hardy. But Argento never really took advantage of the 600-plus voices and the result was an anticlimax.

Brunelle took the title "Everybody Sing!" literally, inviting the audience to join the massed forces in a rendition of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" that ended the celebratory event.

William Randall Beard is a Minneapolis writer.

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