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Lutheran Choir makes the most of Basilica's heavenly acoustics

By David Hawley

Special to the Pioneer Press

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Religious contemplation is the purpose of the Christmas concerts by the National Lutheran Choir that conclude tonight at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis.

Titled "Love Incarnate," it's a beautiful program and also a liturgical service that includes a procession with vestments and readings between musical selections. Applause is not solicited, though it was offered spontaneously at the conclusion of the Friday afternoon concert to performers who had previously exited the sanctuary. They did not return to acknowledge it.

The choir is a larger one — about 60 voices — and they sing with a cloaked, full-throated quality that was sometimes dubbed the "St. Olaf sound" in the days when F. Melius Christiansen was putting the college on the choral map. Done right, the style produces emotional intensity without distorting volume — and it sounds heavenly in an acoustically lively venue like the Basilica.

The program of more than two-dozen works, plus readings and carol singing by the audience, lasts a little more than 90 minutes — demonstrating how much time is taken up during a conventional concert with clapping and bowing. The only distraction at the concert I attended was the crackling of turning pages as audience members tried to follow the texts in their pamphlet-sized programs.

Music Director David Cherwien assembled a program of diversity and drama within a liturgical framework. The program began with an arrangement by Paul Manz of

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Latin plainsong, sung from the rear of the sanctuary; and in fact, some eight works were performed before the chorus proceeded up the aisle during a congregational rendition of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

A highlight of the out-of-sight opening was "Angel Song II," a wordless sonic piece — a kind of ethereal mist — for vocalists by the prolific young British composer Will Todd. Another highlight was a demonstration of the choir's outstanding male vocalists with the setting of the familiar "Ave Maria" by Franz Biebl, a favorite of male choirs.

More unusual works included a Nigerian carol, "Betelehemu," that featured clacked percussive instruments and a lament-sounding work by Swedish composer Anders Ohrwall in which a female soloist and a solo oboist created wordless tropes above chorus chords. The admirable instrumentalists included oboists Stanley King and John Groerich, harpists Nikki Christopher and Sue Taylor, and organist Andrew Schaeffer. The Basilica's organ, to put it mildly, is a wonderful instrument.

What: The National Lutheran Choir

When: 8 p.m. tonight, Basilica of St. Mary, Hennepin Avenue and North 17th Street, Minneapolis

Tickets: \$25-\$10, at the door, at www.nlca.com or 612-722-2301



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