

Voces Novae exits on high note

By **MARTY ROSEN** · May 19, 2004

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In a program that ranged from stringent medieval plainchant to rollicking traditional spiritual, Voces Novae closed its 11th season Monday night at Christ Church Cathedral with a program of a cappella works.

Though Frank Heller III and company are masterful interpreters of established repertoire, hardly a concert goes by that they don't also find at least one brilliant contemporary work that seems to transcend the limits of choral performance.

Monday night, it was the young American composer Eric Whitacre's "When David Heard," an eight-part setting of the text from II Samuel 18:33, "When David heard that Absalom was slain. ..."

In the Voces Novae performance (with a fine solo contribution by tenor Brian Shaw), it was a meditation on grief at once wrenching and ingenious.

The work began with a hushed, almost matter-of-fact focus on a narrow pitch range, built tension with an expressive, quizzical repetition of the words "My son," then built a flying wedge of harmony and volume as it dwelt on Absalom's name, obsessively fragmenting the "Absalom" syllables in a profoundly moving paroxysm of grief. After moments of rapturous anguish came a slow process of healing, stitching together of sad comfort and resigned peace.

Earlier in the program, the choir lined up along the sides of the Cathedral for a rousing split chorus performance of Heinrich Schutz's "Psalm 100." Palestrina's intricate "Exsultate Deo" was delivered with a firm pulse and each of the six parts exquisitely balanced.

The sopranos and altos opened the program with two different takes on the middle ages. First was Hildegard von Bingen's plainchant "O Frondens Vira," with a few slightly blurred entrances that might have gone unnoticed in any less rigorous choir. An "Ave Maria" by American composer Joan Szymko was a well-sung mix of chant, harmony and chiseled counterpoint that exploited this choir's superb ability for dynamic pivots and perfectly controlled timbral shifts.

Kenneth Jennings' adaptation of instrumental music --Variation 9, Nimrod, from Edward Elgar's "Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma)" -- as the basis for an "Agnus Dei" gave Heller an opportunity to recognize departing Louisville Orchestra conductor Uriel Segal, who received a lengthy standing ovation from the audience.

And after a few more works, including a couple of Moses George Hogan spirituals, Heller and Voces Novae also received a well-deserved standing

ovation.