

Smith singers open window to American choral tradition

By Nancy Raabe
News staff writer

Monday night's performance by the Gregg Smith singers in Birmingham-Southern College's intimate Hill Hall, before a nearly full house, was more than a fine concert by an unusually skilled group of 17 singers.

It was a rare window into the history of American choral music in the latter part of this century — courtesy of a conductor who has been at the heart of some of the most important developments for more than four decades.

That person is, of course, Gregg Smith, and his mission is to invigorate our sense of American culture through the seminal medium of choral music.

Smith founded the group that bears his name in 1955, and by 1959 had launched a partnership with Igor Stravinsky that continued until the composer's death 12 years later. It was Smith, in fact, who prepared the chorus and orchestra for Stravinsky's funeral.

Far from exclusive, that liaison is indicative of the seriousness of purpose with which Smith has approached the music of other significant American composers. Monday's program spoke to this dedication in several ways.

Foremost on this occasion were performances of music by Birmingham-Southern's Charles Norman Mason and Dorothy Hindman. Two were world premieres — Mason's provocative elucidation of one of Gerard Manley Hopkins' anguished "sonnets of desolation" titled *Anthem of Despair and Hope*, a sensitive translation into sound of the poet's

MUSIC Review

★ ★ ★ 1/2

The Gregg Smith Singers, in a varied program of choral music conducted by Gregg Smith. In Hill Hall at Birmingham-Southern College, Monday evening.

(Key to rating: ★★★★★, excellent; ★★★, good; ★★, fair; ★, poor.)

inner torment, and Hindman's *I Have Heard . . .*, a sonorous and affirmative setting of passages from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

But Mason's brilliant *From Shook Foil*, included here as well, occupies a class of its own. First performed four years ago by the BSC Concert Choir under Lester Seigel and based on Hopkins' *God's Grandeur*, this setting with synthesized sounds on tape is charged with creativity and delights in the poet's artful use of alliteration. It may well be, as a colleague of Mason's put it, "the piece that will make him famous."

The Singers demonstrated their wisdom and versatility elsewhere on the program as well. Music of Mendelssohn, Dufay, Morton Gould and Gregg Smith himself was illuminated through spatial effects gained by spreading the choir around the hall in various components, a tradition at Gregg Smith concerts. And the conductor chose to emphasize the arresting oddities and harmonic irregularities of Brahms' *Five Songs*, Op. 104, while giving sensitive voice to William Schuman's mesmerizing *Carols of Death*.