

Sursum Corda singers hit new mark for strength, individuality

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Sursum Corda

SURSUM CORDA

Lester Seigel, conductor
Tuesday, Brock Recital Hall
Presented by Birmingham Art Music Alliance

4 stars out of 5

Sursum Corda, the Lester Seigel-led chamber choir, entered cautiously into the potentially thorny domain of Birmingham Art Music Alliance composers on Tuesday.

Now 14 singers strong, Sursum Corda prides itself on a range of repertoire that extends from the Renaissance to the modern, finding its sweet spot in the dense 20th century harmonies of contemporary composers such as Ruth Watson Henderson, Frank Ticheli and Morten Lauridsen. BAMA composers represented at the Brock Recital Hall concert seemed to be aware of that.

The 17th century American William Billings was appropriately represented with "Modern Music," which opened with humorous anticipation. Even funnier were four "Silly Rhymes" by Huntsville composer Don Bowyer, lively portraits of "Merle the Squirrel," "Tony the Pony," "Donna the Iguana" and "A Monkey in the Zoo" by the name of Bobby Sue.

Henderson's "Missa Brevis" was reprised from a previous concert, though it wasn't as focused. Ticheli's "There Will Be Rest," another repeat, hit the mark for its sure-pitched beauty, William Price's "Grant Us Peace" for its reverent introspection.

With Javier Busto's "Ave Verum Corpus" and Lauridsen's "Sure On This Shining Night," the choir crossed a new threshold. While maintaining homogeneity in their collective peaks and valleys, the singers exhibited strength, individuality and a bold transparency not previously heard.

The evening's most challenging score came from overseas. Jan Vicar, a Czech composer and former Birmingham-Southern College faculty member, composed "Toward the Mountains" in 2004. Based on Moravian tunes, it divides the men and women for back-and-forth exchanges, and adds touches of flute, piano and percussion. Its rustic textures and texts, depicting robbers, pastoral and harvest scenes, was performed in an English translation for the first time, but with quizzical lines like "Rye and barley I don't eat, and I know that you're a cheat," something may have been lost in translation.

The concert's featured work was the premiere of Dorothy Hindman's "Sursum Corda," named for the choir. Set to a Ralph Waldo Emerson text, Hindman wrote to the choir's strengths with its reflective beauty and suave harmonies. Like most of the music on the concert, it tested the choir's adaptability to new scores while playing to its strengths.

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