

Music of the Baroque develops superb holiday tradition

Music of the Baroque, Friday at St. Michael Redemptorist Church, 1633 N. Cleveland. Choral and brass music of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Music/Robert C. Marsh

How long does it take to establish a tradition?

In England, where such matters are viewed conservatively, a hundred years might suffice. In Chicago, where the rules are less strict, a decade might do.

In any case, I would like to see a tradition of Christmas concerts such as the program Music of the Baroque offered Friday at St. Michael Redemptorist Church, a Lincoln Park architectural landmark. Music such as this should always be part of the holiday season. We should be able to expect it as an annual blessing.

Thomas Wikman, who directs the group, got the whole idea right the first time he tried it a few years ago. You need a church of the size and acoustical richness of St. Michael Redemptorist, and you need a program of artfully contrasted pieces that exploit those acoustical and architectural opportunities. The music must come from the front, the back and the sides; the entire space must be playing at one time or another in the course of the evening.

Although there are baroque works suited to occasions such as this, Wikman was really offering us a Renaissance concert with the distinctive brass writing of Giovanni Gabrieli—a cathedral composer if there ever was one—running through the various parts of the program and providing a sense of unity. Praetorius, Schuetz, and Monteverdi also were important con-

tributors to the proceedings, but no single work was of any great length.

Wikman showed his skill by combining pieces that went together beautifully, providing the needed contrast and balance. A good example was the group that began with Gabrieli's Canzona Septimi Toni, No. 2, for two brass choirs, went on to two excerpts from Monteverdi's "Magnificat" and closed with Daniel Speer's Sonata for four trombones. Each work was wonderfully satisfying in itself, and yet each set off the others.

The performance standards of Music of the Baroque have been high for years (what better reason for the continued success of the group?) and this program was beautifully played and sung. Wikman had everything right again. I felt no urge to change a thing. I was prepared to enjoy.

The brass ensemble consisted of Music of the Baroque regulars who have been playing with the group for many years and keep on playing, although several now live outside of Chicago. The accuracy of the intonation, the purity of the tone and the clean, bright line of sound each instrument produces are essential to music of this character. In a way, the brass plays the way the chorus sings. The basic aesthetic idea in both cases is the same.

And this is why the closing item on the program, the Te Deum in solemn tone with only the accompaniment of handbells, is one of the most impressive moments, not for its weight or sonority, but for its simple spirituality, its radiant faith and its pure beauty of sound. It sent you into the night rejoicing.

Exultant opening for Baroque players

By Alan G. Artner

FEW PROGRAMS scheduled during the holiday period will better convey a sense of religious exultation than the one Thomas Wikman chose Thursday night to open the 11th season of Music of the Baroque.

His emphasis was on brass and choral music of the 16th and 17th centuries. The appropriately grand setting was St. Michael's Redemptorist Church. Most of the performances also benefitted from the positioning of singers and instrumentalists on opposing platforms, galleries or lofts.

This Venetian practice, known as *cori spezzati* [divided choirs], was being followed even in the 15th Century, although in modest form. Music for alternating choirs of singers or players reached its greatest complexity when some of the composers included Thursday began writing for the Cathedral of St. Mark. There it was not unusual to hear voices and instruments coming from as many as five different places in an array of reciprocating textures and sonorities.

Contemporary performers seldom take full advantage of spatial possibilities and mainly have done so on a few recordings made during the decade of quadrasonic sound. But as Wikman led Giovanni Gabrieli's stirring "In Ecclesiis" without dividing the double chorus at the same church last June, one hoped this time he might go for maximum impact. That he did not is perhaps another sign of the reticence that keeps his group from using original instruments and attaining complete authority in works they obviously know well.

IF THERE WAS a problem, then, it was because the players often sounded so noble and the singers so pure that one expected perfection throughout. Why perform four secular dances by Michael Praetorius when the pungency of old instruments is denied and a familiar acoustic already is known to soften the rhythmic bite? Such infrequent lapses of judgement never spoil concerts as sensitively executed as Wikman's, but they do blemish the profile and almost come as a shock.

How could they not when three singers almost realized the impossibly lavish ornamentation of Claudio Monteverdi's "Duo seraphim" [from the "Vespers" of 1610] and a four-part chorus fervently delivered Tomas Luis de Victoria's "O Magnum Mysterium"? While not without flaw, these were performances of exceptional thought and feeling, performances that conveyed two very different expressions of rapture, each wondrously alive.

"LOBE DEN HERREN, meine Seele" by Heinrich Schuetz was one of the works requiring comparatively large forces, and it suffered from St. Michael's aural blur. But the directness of Praetorius' "Es ist ein Ros entsprungen" and two of Gabrieli's solemn pieces for double brass choirs came across with clarity plus eloquence.

Wikman ended last season's final program with a "Te Deum laudamus" accompanied by handbells. Thursday it was repeated in precisely the same position, giving heart-ease to a large and appreciative audience that clearly had come to cheer.

Music

Baroque concert marvelous fusion of sound, setting

By John Von Rhein
Music critic

THE MUSIC that lifted minds and spirits four centuries ago, that filled magnificent churches with a rich interplay of colors and textures, that joyously reminded mortals of their proximity to God—this was the music that Thomas Wikman chose to conclude the 10th anniversary season of Music of the Baroque Thursday night at St. Michael's Redemptorist Church.

It was altogether a marvelous fusion of sound and setting, of choral joy and instrumental felicity, put together with the same careful attention to programmatic balance and variety, stylistic fidelity, and accurate, lively execution that have distinguished the director's efforts in the larger-scaled baroque choral literature.

The central figures on this program of 16th to 17th Century brass and choral works were three of the greatest composers of their day—Palestrina, the master of late-Renaissance polyphony; Giovanni Gabrieli, the virtuoso sound-painter of St. Mark's Cathedral; and Monteverdi, who glorified Western art music's arrival into a brave new era. Each composer, Gabrieli in particular, conceived of music as a spatial as well as expressive art, and the particular sonoric contrasts and mixtures that can be produced by divided choirs occupying lofty galleries in vast, reverberent churches were basic to the musical style, whether the work itself was sacred or secular in nature.

WIKMAN RECOGNIZED this fact in his decision to perform at St. Michael's, with its high rear balconies, ample reverberation, and huge, ornate altar reaching to the sky. One's only regret was that his budget apparently did not allow him to exploit further this magnificent space. His chorus amounted to a chamber choir of only 26 voices, and though they summoned a fine late-

Renaissance sound and phrasing, a richer concentration of voices would not have been unwelcome in, say, the Monteverdi "Audi coelum" (from Vespers of 1610).

And surely Wikman missed much of the musical point of Gabrieli's wonderful motet, "In ecclesiis," by not dividing the double chorus antiphonally. All through the piece, with its repeated Alleluias, Gabrieli sets off high choir against low-choir-with-instrumental doubling; without spatial separation, the boldly contrasting timbres do not register with anything like their full dramatic effect.

But I do not mean to find undue fault with a program as replete with good things as this one was. The three Palestrina motets were beautifully done, with the kind of floating, disembodied, vibrato-less tone that this "endless polyphony" demands. Even better was the excerpt from Monteverdi's Vespers, its antiphon sung from the gallery by two male voices with guitar accompaniment. This was the sort of music a Venetian of the early 17th Century would have heard on a day of religious celebration, flags proudly unfurled at St. Mark's. The music was suffused with a joy as radiant as the play of Adriatic sunlight on water and architectural stone.

Eight of the city's finest freelance brassmen were on hand to provide the major moments of instrumental diversion: Gabrieli's *Sonata pian' e forte*, the first stereophonic instrumental work extant; sonatas by Giovanni Buonamente and Daniel Speer; and six delightful dances from Tylman Susato's suite of Renaissance terpsichore, "The Danserye." (If you want to hear the tunes that topped the Flemish hit parade of 1550, Susato's got them.) Apart from the players' failure to scale down their *fortes* (which tended to blast harshly), the brass playing was exceptionally skillful.