

## Overnight Chicago

# Music of Baroque spreads its wings

By John von Rhein

Music critic

**JUST BECAUSE** Thomas Wikman's splendid choral ensemble calls itself Music of the Baroque is no reason for it to restrict itself to works of its eponymous period. The temptation to perform some of the choral masterpieces of the classical period with singers and instrumentalists who can do these works justice is simply too great. Wikman is justified in wanting to expand the group's repertory in this manner, and his efforts are to be applauded.

Music of the Baroque is launching its 14th season with just such a repertory foray, Haydn's "Lord Nelson" Mass. It served as the major work of an interesting choral program presented Monday night at St. Paul's United Church.

Haydn's "Lord Nelson" Mass is the best known of the six settings of the Latin mass that the composer wrote for his patron, Prince Esterhazy, after his return from London. As Haydn was writing the final pages in 1798, news reached him of the victory of Admiral Horatio Nelson against Napoleon's fleet—hence the nickname [Haydn gave it the title "Mass in time of fear"], hence the festive explosion of trumpets and drums at the end of the "Benedictus."

**THIS IS** a magnificent work, one of Haydn's greatest, a stirring message of consolation for a continent at war with itself. The mass was conceived as a kind of symphony for solo voices and chorus, and realized with all the technical mastery of Papa Haydn's final creative period.

Wikman found the drama in its stately unfolding. The Esterhazy chapel choir probably was not much larger than the 32 voices Wikman employed. In the church acoustic they sounded like a larger choral body than they are—heartily of tone, accurate of pitch, firm of blend and sensitive of expression. They sang "Dona nobis pacem" with an urgency that left no doubt as to the timelessness of the message.

But it is the vocal quartet that truly lifts Haydn's music heavenward, and in this regard Wikman had an excellent group of soloists in soprano Lorna Haywood, mezzo-soprano Karen Brunssen, tenor Jerome Padorr and baritone Scott Reeve. Haywood, to whom fell the most rigorous duties, sang with vibrant commitment.

She was a pleasure to listen to. At the other end of the vocal compass, Reeve brought a strong voice to the "Qui tollis" section.

Clearly the Haydn masses represent an area that Wikman should investigate further. He does them exceedingly well.

**TWO BRIEF CHORAL** items, Mozart's "Ave verum corpus" [K. 618] and Handel's coronation anthem "Let Thy Hand Be Strengthened," served as an apt prelude to the Haydn Mass. Mozart's motet is church music of unusual tenderness, and it was sung with an affecting, but never affected, purity.

To hear the same chorus go from soft, intimate Mozart to big, majestic Handel is testimony to the group's talent as much as to Wikman's skills as a director. The coronation anthem, written to honor the accession of England's King George II, is another example of the kind of stirring music that this loyal British subject regularly composed for great occasions of state. Wikman and friends will be bringing us several big Handel works later in the season, but this piece got the anniversary celebration off to a properly festive start.

Lest he be accused of neglecting the baroque altogether, Wikman began with two short instrumental concertos, "Spring" from Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons," and a Sinfonia in C by Torelli.

For the Vivaldi, Wikman used a *ripieno* group of nine strings, nicely balancing these against the violin of soloist Elliott Golub, who played with such spirit and style, one could almost visualize the drunken peasants and galloping hunters of the sonnet. Wikman brought in a fuller complement of strings for the Torelli, which served to showcase two violins against the brilliant flourishes of four trumpets.

**FUNDING NOTES:** Music of the Baroque has received a grant of \$15,000 from the Atlantic Richfield Co. It is the second major grant the ensemble has received since 1983 from the oil company.

A grant of \$105,000 from the MacArthur Foundation to the American Conservatory of Music will help support the Chicago institution's community-outreach efforts. The grant, amounting to three annual grants of \$35,000 each, will enable the conservatory to provide music to audiences who now hear few live performances.