



WFMT's Ray Nordstrand, Music of the Baroque board chairman Linda Thoren Neal and Conductor

Thomas Wikman in New York: A qualified success at Lincoln Center.

Baroque in N.Y.: Kudos, mostly

By Howard Reich

Chicago's Music of the Baroque met with a polite, if not especially warm critical reception following its recent, much-anticipated New York debut.

The concert—a longtime dream of the late Lucille Ollendorff, who guided the organization until her death last May—had been sold out for weeks. Roughly 1,100 listeners packed Alice Tully Hall in Lincoln Center Tuesday evening to hear J.S. Bach's "Christmas Oratorio," the strong turnout a testament to the group's far-flung reputation (their concerts are broadcast throughout the U.S. and beyond by the WFMT Fine Arts Network).

All the critics cited the group's technical accomplishments, though each, to varying degrees, felt that a buttoned-down approach by music director Thomas Wikman stifled expressivity.

"One was divided between admiration for the first-rate achievement and frustration over an element of pedanticism that seemed to go along with it," wrote Will Crutchfield in the New York Times, expressing a theme common to the reviewers. "This collection of cantatas includes some of Bach's finest work in the genre. [Nevertheless], for hearing them so securely and transparently done one is grateful,

whatever the other reservations."

The kudos focused on the discipline and precision of soloists, chorus and orchestra, which has long been one of Music of the Baroque's trademarks.

"This is a very well-drilled band," wrote Peter Goodman in Newsday. "Conductor Wikman, erect and stern on the podium, often did little more than provide a sharp, clear beat, yet they played and sang with exceptional crispness and clarity. Wikman is not one of those who leaps, sways and conducts every nuance. His people knew what he wanted and gave it, without much visible effort on his part."

Goodman qualified that praise, however, by adding that "this had both positive and negative effects. The most negative were apparent in the first half, including the first three cantatas. Here, once the precision and beauty of sound were established, the music began to settle into the uniform blandness that can afflict Bach performances."

Bert Wechsler alluded to the same idea in the New York Daily News, writing that Wikman "elicited from his professional instrumentalists no little sweetness and the many beauties of the orchestration. A little more flexibility on his part would help make this ensemble a really major attraction."

On balance, though, it should be noted that Tully Hall is far different from the venues in which the ensemble performs in Chicago—churches where the play of acoustics tends to italicize and, in a way, intensify the performance.

As for the soloists, Karen Brunson's alto was "warm and even but projected neither feeling nor expression" to Newsday's Goodman, showing "conviction but something less than ideal beauty and polish" to the Times' Crutchfield.

Tenor Kurt R. Hansen offered "cleanliness" of sound for the Daily News' Wechsler and an "exciting timbre and brilliant command" of his part for Crutchfield.

Both Newsday and the Times applauded the contributions of bass Myron Myers, baritone Richard Cohn and tenor William Watson.

In the end, the reception could have been far worse—but it could have been better.

NOTE: Music of the Baroque will offer its first concerts of the new year on Jan. 27 at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Evanston and Jan. 28 at Notre Dame Church on West Flournoy Street in Chicago.

The program will offer works new to the Music of the Baroque repertory and featuring trumpets as solo instruments. For details, phone 461-9541.