



Tribune photo by Gerald West

Thomas Wikman leads a rehearsal of Music of the Baroque, which is in its 20th anniversary season.

Early music masters

20 years and 4 centuries with Music of the Baroque

By John von Rhein
Music critic

As success stories go, it is one of the most remarkable in Chicago music, combining all the classic ingredients: tragedy and triumph, slow but purposeful growth, a determination to make it despite formidable obstacles.

But what makes the saga of Music of the Baroque unusual is that the organization, now celebrating its 20th anniversary season, has never broken faith with the credo of its late founding president, Lucille Ollendorff: "You must keep looking for ways to expand artistically, or you stagnate."

That artistic expansion has taken the group, perhaps inevitably, to the citadel of downtown musical culture, Orchestra Hall, for a gala benefit performance of Mendelssohn's "Elijah" Tuesday night to cap off two decades as the city's reigning early music group.

Among the vocal soloists will be soprano Susan Dunn and baritone Timothy Noble as the heroic Old Testament prophet Elijah. Founder and music director Thomas Wikman will direct the 104 choristers and instrumentalists, roughly double his typical complement of performers.

(The benefit will include a preconcert black-tie dinner at Chicago Hilton and Towers and a post-concert soiree in the Orchestra Hall ballroom; phone 312-663-1900 for reservations.)

"It's an appropriate way for us to make our first big foray into the 19th Century reper-



Wikman has prepared and directed every concert for Music of the Baroque.

toire," says the bearded, intense Wikman, "because 'Elijah' is a natural extension of the Handelian oratorio style that has become our signature." The 48-year-old conductor has led MOB in the Chicago premieres of several of Handel's choral masterpieces, including "Athaliah," "Deborah," "Semele" and "Saul."

"I think I have always had it in the back of my mind to perform 'Elijah' with Music of the Baroque. I love the work; it's the one piece of music I know best. I heard the score constantly as a child and accompanied the arias at the piano when I was 6 or 7. I have directed three produc-

tions with other groups; I have felt almost a mission to teach it to people."

Indeed, an important factor in MOB's long-playing success is that Wikman has taught Chicagoans to expect the highest quality performances of the 16th-18th Century literature in which the group specializes. This, and two decades of mostly favorable reviews, have helped to foster remarkable audience loyalty and a solid subscriber base. The organization lists nearly 3,000 subscribers for its 27-concert season.

"The No. 1 reaction we get when we do audience surveys is that people are tuned into the singers and players and the excellence of the overall product," says Kathleen Butera, who was named MOB's president and executive director in 1988 following Ollendorff's death in an automobile accident the previous year.

"The Chicago Symphony and Lyric Opera cover a certain kind of repertoire. But that leaves a musical gap we fill beautifully with our smaller scale and approach. I think the emotional investment that people in the community have made toward us is a large part of what makes Music of the Baroque such a success."

Still, none of this would have taken place without a strong artistic continuity. Wikman has prepared and directed every concert since he created MOB in a small Hyde Park church in 1971.

Having built a stock company of talented local singers and instrumentalists, he has per-

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