

## A joyful noise from Music of the Baroque

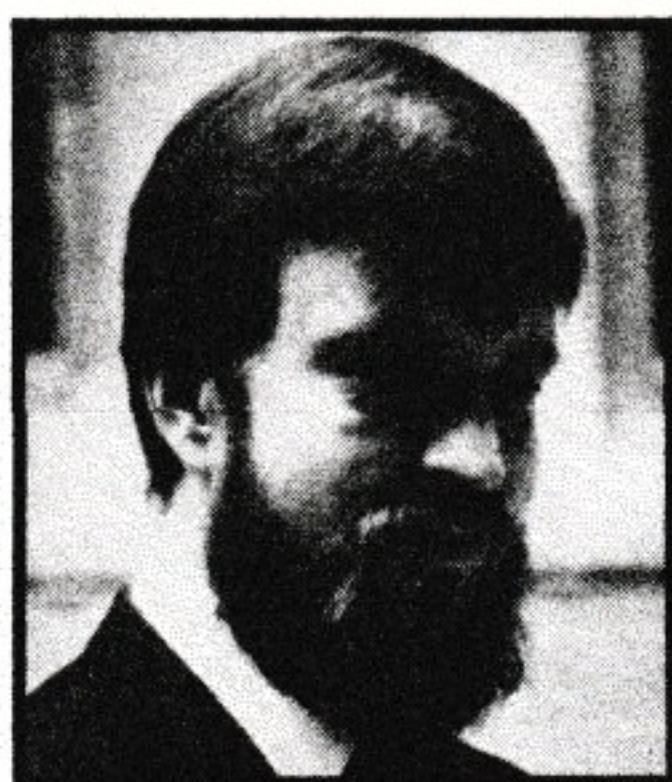
Chicago's 70-member musical ensemble MOB resembles the household staff at Brideshead Castle—discriminating and decorous, with a firm sense of the past. The group plays mostly in churches, and is devoted to strict forms, elaborate ornamentation, and chromaticism in music composed between 1600 and 1750.

"MOB" stands for Music of the Baroque, which, unlike the crime syndicate suggested by its acronym, has never had a bad newspaper review—only raves. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Shannon Rovers, and Teen Age Radiation can't say that.

So *Upfront* said yes when a Michigan Avenue public-relations firm sent two tickets to a MOB performance of Handel's oratorio *Saul*, and a letter that began:

"This is to suggest an interview with one of Chicago's up and coming professional musicians. He is Thomas S. Wikman, 39, founder and conductor of Music of the Baroque, the nation's largest professional [baroque] music organization now performing to sold-out audiences (totaling 15,000) at all four of its Chicago area concert locations."

After a baroque dinner at Un Grand Café in the baroque Belden Stratford Hotel, my baroque-music companion and I walked west on baroque Fullerton Parkway past Governor



Conductor Thomas S. Wikman

Thompson's town house full of baroque antiques to St. Paul's United Church of Christ for the baroque concert. Sitting two rows in front of us were John S. Edwards, general manager of the Chicago Symphony, and Peter Jonas, the artistic administrator. Lyric Opera's general manager, Ardis Krainik, was in the first row of the balcony.

The media star in the title role was bass-baritone Simon Estes, who had just made his Metropolitan Opera debut as the Landgrave in *Tannhäuser*, had been interviewed on Studs Terkel's show, and had sung *My Funny Valentine* at a Valentine's Day reception with heart-shaped banana cake at the Elm Street home of MOB board member Evelyn Wilbanks. *Saul* sopranos Linda Mabbs and Kathryn Bouleyn had been there, too.

The concert was splendid. Wikman, who is not as leonine as Sir Georg Solti, conducted with admirable precision and an eye on the soloists. The choral and instrumental work with soloists tells the story of the king of Israel brought down by jealousy and fear of David, who has just knocked off Goliath. The program notes said that Handel's music exemplifies "the greatest integration of music and drama to be found in any oratorio." The *Tribune* called MOB's concert "an epic work given an epic production." The *Sun-Times* said it was "a happy realization of Handel's grandest manner."



Music of the Baroque ensemble

I especially liked the kettle-drums, and Saul crying in anguish, "Wretch that I am! of my own ruin author!" Coming out, we ran into CBS newsman Bill Kurtis, who lived in the neighborhood then, and he wanted to know what all the excitement was about.

A few days later, Wikman stopped by my office with high praise for Chicago audiences: "They are the toughest nut to crack. The city has profoundly conservative tastes—a quality that keeps them expectant. At the opposite end is New York, where novelty and newness are everything."

"I'm very jealous of the quality of our music," he said. "I single-handedly created an audience for Monteverdi's *Vespers [of the Blessed Virgin]*."

Wikman, whose ensemble performed at the White House at the invitation of President Carter, grew up in Muskegon, Michigan, where he played the piano in the Swedish Covenant Church and came to love baroque music. He has built MOB from a small church choir, in Hyde Park's St. Paul and the Redeemer Church in 1971, to a major performing-arts group with international respect and a budget of more than half a million dollars. He still teaches voice, and four of his protégés recently made debuts with the Metropolitan, San Francisco, and Lyric opera companies. "I can't afford to hire the people I trained," he said. MOB broadcasts often on WFMT, has produced an LP, and hopes to

tour Europe and China soon.

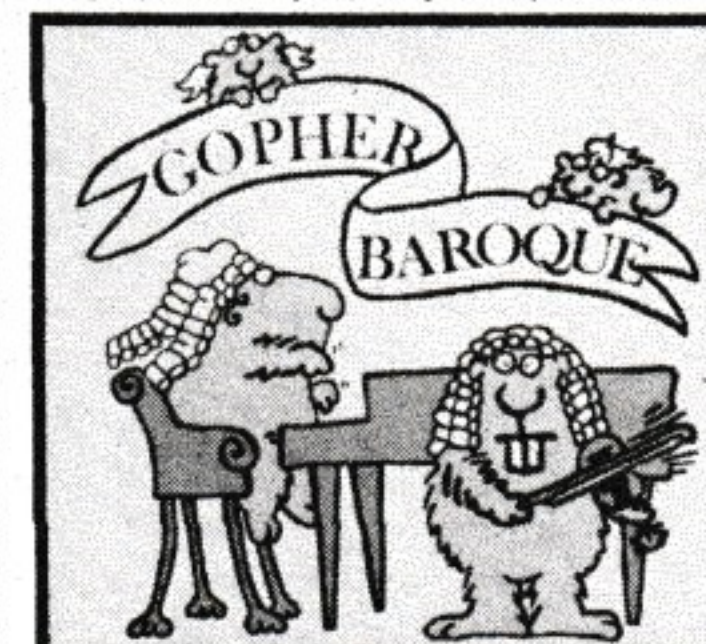
Wikman foresees a golden age for baroque music, with its "sensual celebration of life—the earthy values on one hand, and religion and tragedy on the other."

A few days later, I telephoned Lucille Ollendorff, board president and general manager of MOB, which is based in the Fisher Building, 343 South Dearborn Street.

"It's hard for me to talk about it without sounding sappy," she said. "It's a joyful medium, expressing the glory and tragedy of mankind. When concert time comes, I know why I'm spending my life this way. It's hard to talk about music with words. That's why it's music. What's that noise? Your typewriter?"

We said goodbye; I turned off my electric typewriter, and played the Music of the Baroque LP in a WFMT control room. The side began with Palestrina's *O bone Jesu, exaudi me*. . . I leaned back and understood what Mrs. Ollendorff meant. It is a joyful noise, and you must hear it for yourself.

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## Tempo

# Music of Baroque gives an epic 'Saul' epic production

By Howard Reich

**H**ANDEL'S ORATORIO "Saul," which was majestically performed Friday night by Music of the Baroque, is an epic work that must succeed on several levels if it is to hold an audience's attention for the near three hours of its duration.

It requires soloists that can spin a gorgeous legato phrase while communicating the verbal meaning of the text [written in English]. It demands choral and instrumental forces that can thunder at one moment, whisper the next. And, most important of all, it requires a conductor that can deftly weave these divergent forces to convey the story of Saul the aging king, David the heroic young warrior, and the ghastly conflict that raged between them.

Friday night's performance at the First United Methodist Church in Evanston had all of this and more. It was one of those rare oratorio performances in which words and music alone [minus scenery and props, as is the oratorio tradition] created the more spectacular dramatic effect of grand opera.

Of all the excellent soloists gathered for the occasion, the most commanding voice belonged to Kathryn Bouleyn as Merab, the young daughter of Saul, who scorns David. The bright timbre of her voice rang through the church, and the intense delivery was perfectly appropriate to the haughty character she portrayed. What's more, her high notes had a clarity of pitch and strength of projection many sopranos would envy.

**ALSO COMPELLING** was bass-baritone Simon Estes, who brought profound emotion to the role of Saul, the doomed emperor. To Estes, Saul is a figure of imposing pathos, driven to a demise of

his own making by the darkest of emotions. Estes shaped his phrases in grandly arched fashion, exaggerating the dramatic evolution of his character. Vocally, he has a beautiful tone in the middle range; a less convincing effect in the low range.

For their part, the other soloists effectively fleshed out the characters in this biblical drama. Counter tenor Jeffrey Gall was all virtue and innocence as David, the young stoic who refuses to stoop to Saul's depths; soprano Linda Mabbs was deeply moving as Michal, especially when she tenderly sang of her love for David; tenor Richard Versalle was the least lyric and the most declamatory of the soloists, portraying an anguished Jonathan torn between his loyalties to Saul and his love for David; and bass Arthur Berg was downright haunting as the Apparition of Samuel who returns from the dead.

But beyond the achievements of the soloists, Friday's concert was a triumph of ensemble playing.

The instrumentalists, for example, offered immaculate technique, flawless melodic ornaments and lyric phrases that were turned to maximum expressive advantage.

**THE CHORAL GROUP** was even more striking, showing strength not only when singing full force, but also in the smaller vocal ensembles Handel explores during the course of the oratorio.

The sensitive shaping of the music and the drama by Thomas Wikman, Music of the Baroque director, made "Saul" so compelling an evening. The concert will be repeated at Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest on Tuesday and St. Paul's United Church on Chicago's Near North Side on Wednesday.