

FIRST PERSON

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A Chicago choirmaster sings the praises of baroque music.

"A lot of today's singers would have been laughed out of existence in the days of Handel and Bach."

Thomas Wikman, 40, who started playing the piano at 4, composing at 5, and leading church choirs at 14, knew early on that he was going to be a church musician, a choirmaster in the grand tradition of Palestrina and Handel and Bach. After music studies, mainly at Chicago's American Conservatory of Music, he fulfilled that ambition when he became choirmaster in 1965 at St. Edward's Church in Lincolnwood and then in 1968 at St. Paul and the Redeemer in Hyde Park.

Little did he know that he would also become the founder and conductor of Music of the Baroque, a group that specializes in the choral and instrumental works of such composers as Palestrina, Vivaldi, Monteverdi, and Bach. It started out as a small church ensemble Wikman formed in 1970, but under his baton it quickly won acclaim as one of the city's major cultural organizations. Now grown to 70 singers and instrumentalists, it broadcasts often on WMFT-FM, has cut its third LP record, and is currently giving its 12th annual concert series at various Chicago-area locations.

"I sort of backed into it," Wikman said when he talked about his passion for baroque music and the rise to world renown of Music of the Baroque to Magazine staff member Bill Mañago.

The origin of Music of the Baroque has sometimes been romanticized, but it came about simply because I was a church musician, which I still am. The idea was to do Sunday afternoon concerts at St. Paul and the Redeemer as part of our church music program. I paid some of the singers with free voice lessons. I was a voice teacher then—I still am—and I largely taught all the original singers in that choir.

A violinist friend who's now my concertmaster helped me organize the orchestra. As with the singers, we tried to recruit the very best, like our bassoonist, one of the best I've ever heard, who fortunately was a member of the parish. We signed him up one day when he happened to walk into the vestry.

But though the idea was not to give independent concerts, we soon started giving them outside the church, supporting the program with ticket sales and occasional contributions. We started first with the better-known pieces such as the "Messiah," the "B Minor Mass,"



Thomas Wikman, founder and conductor of Music of the Baroque.

the two Bach "Passions," and then added the less-familiar ones, like the Monteverdi "Vespers [of the Blessed Virgin]" and Purcell's "Fairy Queen." The response from the start was good and became steadily better so that now we're playing to packed houses all the time.

One high point—I guess it is a high point, though there are other achievements I consider more important—was being invited in 1977 to play at the White House. The occasion was a state dinner for Crown Prince Fahd of Saudi Arabia, and when it came time to play, it was President Carter himself who opened the doors to the dining room and asked us to come in. Then he asked his guests to be silent and listen to the music. I understand he's been the only president to do this at such functions.

Baroque music, we learned, is Carter's favorite, and before we started to play—our piece was Telemann's "Trio Sonata in A Minor"—he told his guests who Telemann was and talked about our instruments, especially the harpsichord. The next day we came back for another dinner performance, this time for some Democratic group. It was all very 18th-Century and fun.

But the real high points, the mountaintop experiences for me as a conductor have been the first times I did such great pieces as "The Passion According to St. John," in '73; the "Mass in B Minor," in '73; the "St. Matthew Passion," in '74; the Monteverdi "Vespers," in '76. Those are the thrills I tend to remember.

As for low points, well, we worry about money, of course, which we need to recruit and keep the best possible singers and instrumentalists. Subscription sales for the concert series have been very good, but I would feel more secure financially if we were endowed. For me the discouragement tends to come when I feel, even when the house is packed, that more people should be there to enjoy the big wonderful pieces we work so hard to do.

The audience, of course, can make a difference, but even without a crowd, a baroque performance can catch fire inside of itself largely because of the emphasis on the vocal medium. The human voice was the instrument this music was written for; the orchestra was only part of it. And if there's one thing I can lay claim to—let's say the most vitally important thing to me—is striving for the highest standards of authentic bel canto.

This means singing with a voice that can start as a very soft sound—like a flute and with all the characteristics of the flute—then without a break swell out to as loud as a trumpet and with a wide range of vibrato, and still without a break, spin back down to sound again like a flute. The closest to it today would be a Pavarotti or a Marilyn Horne.

Today a lot of singing is done by tiny, monochromatic voices that push a little bit for volume and swallow a little bit for softness, and it's only because of the microphone that such voices have achieved artistic preeminence. In the

days of Handel and Bach they would have been laughed out of existence.

There's also a strong rhythm to each baroque piece and a lot of room for spontaneity. To imagine a baroque singer in performance, think of Pavarotti—jamming. Pavarotti singing, say, a Verdi aria and then spontaneously taking off on his own melody, improvising a new cadenza right there in front of you—this would be thrilling beyond belief. Yet this was common in the baroque period when, in addition to undergoing long years of rigorous voice training, no one could become a singer unless he could also write motets, compose polyphony.

Bach, of course, is the greatest baroque composer. In fact, he's the greatest composer. More people listen to him than to any other composer. Just look at record catalogs and see how many more pages there are of Bach than of any other composer. Mozart, I guess, would be the only other composer to come close to him. Beethoven knew only a scattering of Bach's piano works, but that was enough for him to consider Bach the greatest composer ever.

With Bach alone we'd almost never run out of pieces, big and small, for our repertoire. Add Handel, Vivaldi, Purcell, Monteverdi... and the possibilities become limitless. I'd like to do more Bach cantatas and more all-instrumental pieces. Our first completely orchestral concert last year got an excellent response, and we're doing one again this season. Somewhere along the line I'd like to do a Handel opera. That would be a big production, and we'd need a big piggy bank to pull it off.

Artistically the future looks bright for us. As far as I can tell and from all reports, we're the biggest and the best in our class. Yes, there are other baroque groups around, and they're good in what they do. But in terms of scale and depth of repertoire and the consistently excellent performance of so many major pieces, there's nothing else like us. Not in Boston, not in New York, not even in London and Europe. I mean, with Music of the Baroque I've already conducted the "B Minor Mass" 10 times. I doubt if there's any other conductor who's done that. And nowhere else can you find a group that does a Gabrieli program and the "St. John Passion" and the Monteverdi "Vespers" as part of one concert series. But we're doing it here in Chicago.

Basically, though, I'm still a church musician. I haven't been a choirmaster since 1978, but I view these Music of the Baroque concerts as no different from what we did in church on Sundays. The music is the same, though on a larger scale, so that what I'm doing now is a continuation of what I've been doing from the beginning. It's what I trained for, and what I love to do.