

After a decade, Music of Baroque is a perfect 10

Music of the Baroque, Thomas Wikman conductor, with Elliott Golub and Everett Zlatoff-Mirsky, violins, Linda Mabbs, soprano, and Darrell Rowader, tenor, at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall (Northwestern University, Evanston) Monday.

Overture to "Solomon" and "Ode on St. Cecilia's Day," Handel; "Lord Let Me Know Mine End," Maurice Greene; Concerto for Two Violins, Bach.

Music/Robert C. Marsh

One of the most conspicuous musical success stories in Chicago in the 1970s was Music of the Baroque, which began as an ambitious Hyde Park group and now, in its 10th season, is offering four subscription series in four key portions of the metropolitan area. How did we ever live without it?

The reason for its success was not difficult to grasp if you heard the first program of the current season as presented in the Evanston series Monday. Pick-Staiger Hall was set ringing with music, 18th century religious and quasi-religious writing at its most splendid, with a Bach concerto for contrast.

THE GROUP SUCCEEDS because its performances are consistently first-class. Under Thomas Wikman's direction, it has established and maintained a standard of quality any performing organization might view with respect.

This suggests, in turn, that it has the musical resources on which to draw: an excellent chorus that Wikman has recruited and trained and that retains its musical identity through annual changes in personnel; fine solo voices and an orchestra that, again under Wikman's tutelage, has grown into the Baroque style.

But this growth has not all been on the part of those instructed. Wikman, by teaching others, has gained mightily himself. He is a much finer, more secure musician than he was a decade ago.

Finally, the group is run well. Musically, it is professional. Backstage, in its operations, it is equally professional. It is well-managed. It knows how to raise money. It knows how to build audiences.

IF WIKMAN INTENDED this program as a sort of progress report, it served that function well. Handel's overture to "Solomon" gave us the state of the orchestra. (It has never been better.) Maurice Greene's anthem filled us in on the state of the chorus. (Excellent.) Then the Bach concerto showed us how the principal instrumentalists are faring. Elliott Golub and Everett Zlatoff-Mirsky, with a chamber-sized accompaniment of a half-dozen players, gave us this familiar work with a splendid sense of energy, a secure grasp of the style, and a wonderful spirit of delight in communicating Bach's ideas.

Then we came to Handel's "Ode on St. Cecilia's Day," in effect, a hymn of praise to music itself, in which you put it all together and use your resources to bring out the great rolling themes and the climactic moments for trumpet and drums. The vocal soloists were right into the manner of the work. Linda Mabbs' richly hued soprano is one of the great assets of the group, and Darrell Rowader is the kind of tenor you expect to return in future roles. Together, they carried the primary burden of projecting the score, but always fully supported by their colleagues and strongly guided by the conductor.

It was a splendid summation for the first decade of a noble enterprise.