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Music: Going for Baroque

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Chicago

For an hour on a recent Saturday afternoon, the 32-voice chorus had filled the United Church of Hyde Park with the complex and glorious notes of Haydn's "Lord Nelson Mass," easily drowning out the old building's knocking heating pipes. Then came the rehearsal's hardest part.

"OK," said Thomas Wikman, the group's 42-year-old conductor, rapping his baton for attention. "How many sopranos can rehearse only next Tuesday? How about only Wednesday? Can anybody make it both? Neither? Now, altos. . . ."

Mr. Wikman explained later: "We have to work around the individual schedules of our singers, just about all of whom have solo careers, and the five or six symphony orchestras that employ our musicians. Compared to that, our musical problems are simple."

But solve them they did, and Music of the Baroque, 65 singers and musicians strong, opened its 14th season a few weeks ago with the soaring Nelson Mass, one of what Mr. Wikman calls the "big, wonderful" pieces that are its specialty.

Scheduled for later in the ensemble's five-program, 26-concert subscription series are such grand numbers as Bach's "The Passion According to St. Matthew" and Handel's "Athaliah." "I know of no other group, anywhere, that does baroque regularly on the scale that we do," declares conductor Wikman. "Pieces that would be major blowouts for anyone else are routine for us."

Others say that might be stretching things; plenty of groups are going for baroque in these days of revival for 17th- and 18th-century music, and some of their productions are quite grand.

No one, though, doubts that Music of the Baroque has carved a niche as a premier exponent of the form—and as an enviable box-office success. From humble beginnings under Mr. Wikman as an occasional, Sunday-afternoon church endeavor, it now boasts some 2,800 subscribers, a 90%-plus sellout rate for its newly expanded concert series, a sheaf of rave reviews and three good-selling albums.

Last year, it was one of five musical organizations—and the only one with a choral component—to receive a challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Graduates of its chorus include such soloists of note as Isola Jones, Philip Creech, Linda Mabbs and Richard Versalle. It is now negotiating to perform a 13-concert series for a hookup of 250 radio stations in the U.S. and Canada under the auspices of local station WFMT.

Furthermore, it's one of the few groups that can be said to have created the local market for its kind of music. "Before Music of the Baroque, very little early music of any kind was performed around Chicago," says John von Rhein, music critic for the Chicago Tribune. "It's that rare group that combines genuine musical scholarship with the performance skills

that make converts. There's nothing musty about the way it does baroque. When it errs, it's usually on the side of overexuberance."

The tall, bearded Mr. Wikman doesn't believe that exuberance is so bad, "over" or not. "Most people think that baroque is a sedate form because, except maybe for an occasional 'Messiah,' that's the way they've heard it," he says. "The truth is that, in the historical period, they put on large-scale performances whenever they had the money. The churches did that especially, and since I'm basically a church musician (he's a choirmaster and recital organist) that's the side that has always attracted me most."

Mr. Wikman cites similar grounds for his rejection of the "period" instruments that other baroque-music groups feature. "We use a harpsichord, of course, but to go beyond that would be too limiting," he contends. "Not many of the best musicians today play viola da gambas and such. If we insisted on them, we'd condemn ourselves to thinking small."

"We do chamber works—in fact, we start a separate chamber series in January—but we want to present a much wider repertory," he goes on. "People are just discovering how much great music was written in that time. The baroque was one of the few periods that highlighted choral music. Its melodies have an internal logic that people find satisfying. There's a strong spiritual element to it, and it speaks in a noble voice. I think people are looking for those things today."

In search of this wider repertory Music of the Baroque has presented a score of pieces that are new to Chicago and, probably, a lot of other places as well. The list includes Monteverdi's "Vespers," "The Day of Judgment" by Telemann, Purcell's "King Arthur," and the Handel oratorios "Saul," "Deborah" and "Theodora."

This season's new production will be an English version of Handel's "Athaliah." It's about a biblical queen who murders her relatives to get the job—only to get it herself in the end. "We read about it, and dug it up," Mr. Wikman says. "As far as I know, it's never been recorded, and I've never seen it performed. We're curious to see how it will come out."

Those wishing to find out for themselves will have to come to Chicago, because Music of the Baroque has never traveled and has no immediate plans to do so. "Travel is too expensive and exhausting for singers, and it fouls up everybody's schedules," the conductor says. "Announce a long road tour, and everybody would quit."

Well, maybe not everybody. "With any other choral group, I'd say no to a tour, but with this one, I'd consider it," says bass Myron Myers, a member who teaches voice at Northern Illinois University and has soloed in New York. "It's the only chorus I've been in where the voices are so good that I can hear myself sing. That alone is worth plenty."