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Beautiful blend of voices: Canadian Chamber Choir pulls off peerless performance

Ilse Zadrozny

Let's call the Canadian Chamber Choir a national treasure. Its 17 members - professionally trained musicians - come from across Canada, and they invest everything they sing with an unheard-of degree of excellence. Their conductor is Montreal's choral wizard, Iwan Edwards.

The CCC devotes itself to the performance of modern music, mostly that of Canadian composers. The choir and Edwards are also active in workshops across Canada, to teach other choirs and choral conductors.

Although the ensemble has since 2001 been performing four yearly concert programs in various Canadian cities, its appearance on Saturday at Redpath Hall was actually its first in Montreal. With Pamela Reimer as pianist, the program offered music by nine composers.

It began with Britten's Hymn to St. Cecilia - patron saint of music. In this a cappella piece,

the ensemble's clear diction and polished blend were as exemplary as its extraordinary refinements of continual dynamic shading - always smooth, even at triple pianissimo.

The singers maintained these qualities all evening. But they also impressed greatly with their flawless intonation in such forbidding works as *In Honorem Vitae* by Antonin Dvořák, and in Stewart Grant's *Love Songs* - often hard to pitch despite its piano part. (The composer, from whom the choir had commissioned this work, was at the concert.)

The second half featured André Prévost's *Setting Suns*, three blissful Elgar pieces, a melancholy anthem by Rodney Sharman - sung ever so quietly by the men alone. With piano followed Eleanor Daley's charming *The Stars are with the Voyageur*, and Lionel Daunais's settings of six very funny French Dada texts, which ended a fabulous concert with laughter.



www.canadianchamberchoir.ca



National choir comes home to Brandon Joanne F. Villeneuve

This week, the Canadian Chamber Choir, an ensemble of 17 singers from across the country, is converging upon Brandon University - its home base - to kick off its third season with a mini tour of Manitoba. "There were three members of the choir that lived in Brandon and it was easy to set up our project because we had a lot of support here," says Karla Ferguson. The central location was another advantage considering members fly in from every province as well as the Northwest Territories. After several days of rehearsals and masterclasses, the singers will be performing in Neepawa, Brandon and Winnipeg.

The ensemble is the creation of a few former National Youth Choir members who wished to find professional choral opportunities, particularly outside of Toronto and Vancouver - which both have professional choirs - and to maintain a national connection within this new group. "I think, partly because we were so used to the Youth Choir experience," says Ferguson, one of the founding members and the executive director of the Canadian Chamber Choir (CCC), "it was a natural progression that we thought: 'We could do that as professionals as well - meet and do intense rehearsals, and then follow that with performances.'"

The CCC is an organic entity in that membership is always different. Some singers participate in some projects and perhaps not in others because of scheduling constraints.

"It works really well that we integrate new singers all the time," says Ferguson. "We're looking for people with an undergrad degree in voice or the equivalent in choral experience. "Generally, our singers are emerging on the professional scene."

The CCC's main mission is to offer more professional opportunities to all of its members. "As we discussed our mandate, it grew to encompass emerging conductors and emerging composers as well," Ferguson says. "We have an assistant conductor with us regularly, who is one of the singing members with the choir. With this project, for the very first time, we have an apprentice conductor." The ensemble's principal conductor, Iwan Edwards, is one of Canada's foremost in the choral music field. He mentors the CCC's up-and-coming conductors. The founder of several Montreal-based choirs, Edwards is also the Chorus Master with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra.

"Part of the mandate of the choir is to explore and present Canadian repertoire," Edwards says. "We have a rather large percentage of really very good composers of choral music in Canada. As a result, over the past 20 years, this country has developed a wealth of Canadian choral music which is being performed more and more, not just in this country, but elsewhere in the world." Edwards stressed that the CCC chooses to focus on Canadian works, not for political reasons, but because it deserves to be done. "It's not music

which is cold, forbidding, either," Edwards says. "It's music which is accessible, but it doesn't mean that it's not well-crafted. The listener can understand it. That's our function as performers to make sure that they can do that." The CCC's repertoire also includes works by composers like Poulenc, Britten and Brahms. "Programming is very important to me," Edwards says. "I spend a lot of time on it to make sure there is a marriage between all the different composers and styles."

Edwards conducts the CCC several times per year, and the ensemble meets in various parts of the country. The selection of the ensemble's destinations depends on a community's interest in choral music and a need in amateur groups for help and advice from professionals. Last season, the CCC concentrated its efforts in Nova Scotia and British Columbia. This year, the CCC will also be appearing in Quebec in March and Saskatchewan in the fall.

The Canadian Chamber Choir will appear Jan. 23 in Neepawa, at the Knox Presbyterian Church at 7 p.m. On Jan. 24, the group will be at the First Presbyterian Church in Brandon. That concert begins at 8 p.m. The choir will also present two concerts in Winnipeg, including one on January at the Centara New Music Festival. For more information about the Brandon concert, call 727-9631. For more information about the choir and auditions, visit www.canadianchamberchoir.ca.



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Canadian Chamber Choir beyond brilliant Hugh Fraser

Life has a way of sending us messages. Mine keeps pointing out that what I should've done the last few decades was keep my mouth shut. Last week I said seven days was too short a time to combine five choirs into "a single silken choral fabric." I said that kind of refinement wasn't of the essence when rollicking through Carl Orff's Carmina Burana and, despite rough edges, the choirs did a marvellous and very exciting job for a very satisfying performance.

This week I lent an ear to the Canadian Chamber Choir as it sang in St. Luke's Anglican Church, Burlington under the guidance of Iwan Edwards. Edwards is the man who prepares choirs for the Montreal Symphony, so conductors can conduct their chosen symphonic works in the serene and certain knowledge that despite what the bassoons do, the choir will be fine.

He told us the 17 brilliant young singers from across Canada formed a choir and asked him to lead it, a privilege he gladly accepted: "Because they wanted to have a professional experience in representing their country at the highest artistic levels."

They brought a fiendishly

challenging program of mostly Canadian music. Eric Robertson's Four Songs of Remembrance, settings of First World War poems by Siegfried Sasson and Wilfred Owens, Srul Irving Glick's Triumph of the Spirit and also Glick's In Memoriam to Leonard Bernstein, Ruth Watson Henderson's Crazy Times and Welford Russell's Who is at my Window. The non-Canadian content was Britten's Sacred and Profane, Faure's Pavane, Brahms' Sechs Quartette op. 12 and Clement Janequin's Le Chant des oyseaux - a wonderful two hours worth of the most difficult choral work you could wish for.

The singers began preparing this program just six days before, and single silken choral fabric doesn't begin to sum up their achievements. That was probably achieved in the first half hour of Rehearsal One. The rest of the time they must've spent making the most stunning anti-war statement out of Robertson's Dead Musicians, which needed soprano Julia Davids to step out and conduct half the choir as Edwards had the men rollicking through Another Little Drink Won't Hurt Us on the side. They completely undid me with the heartbreaking victory of Glick's Avinu Malkeinu, from Triumph of the Spirit.

Davids also conducted the Janequin and the choir's joyful bird songs were a stunning choral feat. But then so was the Britten and the incredible diction in the Watson Henderson. I could go on about shivering pianissimos that defied being profaned by applause, phrasing that was fresh and thoughtful and a tone that called for accompaniment by angelic harps.

Which brings us to St. Luke's piano - let's just say least said hopefully soonest re-voiced. Accompanist Dominique Roy was excellent with what he had. So much of the Canadian music had extensive, central piano passages, which he managed brilliantly.

Suffice it to say don't miss this choir if you ever get another chance.

