

Renaissance Singers reflect holiday joy



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By Stephen Preece, for The Record

KITCHENER — The title said it all, Saturday evening at St. John’s the Evangelist church in Kitchener, with the Renaissance Singers invoking “Christmas Cheer” through traditional music and readings for the season. This was the second of four concert programs in a season rotating performances at various locations throughout the region.

The choir is in a building year, with a new artistic director, Gordon Burnett, and a number of new faces in the group of 26 singers. Burnett brings a magnanimous presence to the ensemble which has important roots in the community and performs with spirit and soulful enthusiasm.

The opening piece, *Make We Joy Now in This Feast*, by Toronto composer Derek Holman, was an ambitious choice out the gate. The choir didn’t seem quite ready to tackle its tricky harmonies and challenging structure. Their confidence growing as they worked their way into the music, it might have been better deeper into the performance.

The next set of three works told the Christmas story through three Renaissance motets, *Dixit Maria* and *Angelus ad pastores* by Hans Leo Hassler, and *Ecce virgo concipies* by Heinrich Isaac. The program notes made the interesting analogy to a triptych you might find in an art gallery, and this particular set was my favourite part of the overall performance.

Perhaps living up to their namesake with this period music, there was a good fit with the capabilities of the choir, and the choristers sang the music with particular relish and vibrancy. In particular with the Isaac piece, the singers locked into their harmonies and sang with poise and a special sense of expression and nuance.

The performance featured three sing-along carols arranged by Derek Holman, each interesting and contemporary takes on the traditional songs. Surprisingly, the choir seemed to be searching for pitches in their parts to *O Come All Ye Faithful* — this classic gem may not have had priority in rehearsal.

Narrator Jay Baker presented mostly comedic readings and anecdotes throughout the performance. His wry humour and good sense of delivery had the desired effect — adding levity by poking fun at things like gift wrapping, liberal imbibing of Wassail, and the inevitable drama around the annual Christmas pageant — though his comments could easily have been trimmed by a third.

The second half featured more of the secular side of Christmas, with some great chestnuts such as *The Christmas Song*, by Mel Torme, and a wild and wonderful version of *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*, arranged by Harry Somers. Particularly impressive in this half were the unison lines highlighting the ability of this choir to blend and provide a rich and warm collective tone on such works as Ritter’s *What Sweeter Music*.

The concert for the most part had a clean sense of preparation and reflected a pure feeling of joy in singing. The palpable chemistry between conductor and chorister bodes well for the future.

The group performs again with the program *Lux Aeterna*, March 27, 2010 in Waterloo and March 28 in Galt.