

Radiant tones in choral pageant

University Concert Choir/
St. Cecilia Orchestra
Convocation Hall
November 26

review by John Charles

It looked like a Christmas pageant for sardines: the stage was packed, the house was packed, the over-flow audience sat in the lobby.

But Convocation Hall was simply hosting an imaginative concert combining the University Concert Choir and the St. Cecilia Orchestra. And there was nothing fishy about the results Monday evening.

Vaughan Williams' *Serenade to Music* Debussy's *La Demoiselle Elue* and Haydn's 12th and final Mass, the *Harmoniemesse* made for an exhilarating evening of choral music.

Maybe the idea of the Vaughan Williams Debussy together suggests too much of a good thing, since both works share a passive, ecstatic approach to their texts. But conductor Malcolm Forsyth took a brisker approach to the *Serenade* than is often heard, and it

worked quite well. The dramatic contrasts Forsyth emphasized — that trumpet flourish at the words, "Music, hark!" — made this lushly radiant piece the evening's most confidently performed work.

Though originally written for just 16 soloists, Forsyth contrasted four vocalists with the chorus, and it worked just as well. His soloists were adequate, rather than exciting, though mezzo Elizabeth Raycroft sang with considerable natural ability. Her return as the *recitante* in the Debussy was thus welcome.

The concert choir (prepared by its conductor, Leonard Ratzlaff) is 105 voices strong, but 72 of them are women, which makes for a lopsided sound. It must be hard to turn away good female voices, but that should be considered if the men are not to be consistently drowned out. The tenor sound at this age, though attractive, tends to be soft in texture, and doesn't cut through, as the altos and sopranos do. And the baritones were clearly audible only when they had solo entrances, or when cellos or bassoons were doubling their line.

The Debussy is set to a tediously ethereal

text by Rossetti that sounds like something Dante left out of his *Divine Comedy*. But Debussy's music elevates it, and this 1887 work points back to Wagner's *Parsifal* (and Gounod's less-admired operas), as well as forward to Debussy's later masterpieces, such as his opera *Pelleas et Melisande*.

Forsyth took Debussy briskly and forthrightly, as he did the *Serenade*, but the hushed reverie-like atmosphere of this work resists such treatment. Those oboe and horn solos should be folded within layers of strings like whipped cream, and to highlight them makes the work sound rather garish. Perhaps a student orchestra can't sustain the kind of murmuring tone which the piece needs, but the result, though still highly enjoyable, sounded more like Massenet than *cher Claude*.

Carol Dyck was a fresh, full-voiced *Demoiselle*, and those hauntingly declaimed lines, which threaten to blossom into a melody yet never do, sounded beautiful and impassioned.

The work's climax, when the women's chorus sings "The light thrilled toward her,"

wasn't achieved because the strings' tremolo wasn't sustained properly. It's a vivid pictorial moment when done right.

The women sang very well throughout, with clearly revealed harmonies, and there was more cause for gratitude than complaint in getting to hear this seldom-performed work.

After intermission Ratzlaff took over the podium for Haydn's last choral work, the *Harmoniemesse* of 1802. This is a masterpiece of confident inspiration and joy, with such a steady flood of sunny tunes it makes a perfect antidote to the languid and shadowy implications of the two preceding works.

Ratzlaff conducted relentlessly, as if he had once been accused of lingering over some passage, and had resolved never to be guilty again. Much of the Mass benefits from a lively, spirited tempo and showing us the work's elemental energy in an un sentimental manner revealed a true understanding of Haydn's style. But there's not much to be gained in flogging the orchestra onward when the strings have six notes for every one vocal part. And that happened frequently, which gave a helter-skelter scrambling accompaniment to the forceful enthusiasm of the chorus.

The vocal quartet — Kathleen Neudorf, Eileen O'Dwyer, Matthew Hendrickson, David Zacharko — coped easily with the tempo, entering with dead accuracy, and handling their ravishing lines with confidence, if not always a pleasing tone. Neudorf was the stand-out here.

The lower male voices were notable on the big fugues, *Cum Sancto Spiritu*, and *Et Vitam Venturi*, but once the whole chorus had lustily entered, the women took over as before.

Exciting, and often beautiful, it certainly was. But the Mass might have seemed more joyous and spiritual if Ratzlaff had occasionally given the Mass more dynamic range, and some breathing space.

Luba is a band, not a person

Interview by Don Teplysk

"Luba is a band," stresses Luba Kowalchuk near the conclusion of our interview. "It's been said before, but we're like a family."

Luba is commenting on the possibility of other band members becoming dissatisfied with being left out of the spotlight. "I'm only the band spokesperson because that is what the band desired."

Luba, the band, hails from Montreal and has been together for the better part of five years. The band was formed in 1979 by drummer Peter Marunzak, guitarist Mark Lyman and Luba. Michael Bell joined a year later, and keyboardist Pierre Marchand rounded out the current lineup of Luba three years ago. Their debut mini-album, released two years ago, produced a nationwide hit, "Everytime I See Your Picture", and unexpectedly thrust the band to the musical forefront.

Commercial success changed everything,

including how Luba listens to the radio.

"It's difficult to listen to myself sing. It is really exciting the first time you hear the song on the radio, but...I just can't do it."

Another change Luba faces is her newfound public image. "I'm really a shy person off-stage," Luba says. "I love to get dressed up for a performance, but there is pressure to look that way all the time. People seem to expect me to look like I do on the cover all the time."

This is an impossibility since the band travels by bus while on the road.

"Life on the road is hectic," Luba continues. "The guys are allowed to have their hair tussled and sport a five o'clock shadow. That looks rugged. But my hair and makeup always have to be perfect and I have to look fresh all the time. I don't always want to look that way," Luba concludes.

Being a high school student during the seventies, Luba might be influenced by the

performers of that period. Luba quickly dispels that belief.

"When I was growing up, I was most influenced by the music of the sixties. The Beatles. Motown. The black R & B influence was very big."

Citing her high regard for the rhythm and blues vocal bands of the Motown era, I ask her about a band that is developing a career ripping off Motown—Wham!

"Nothing," Luba states. "They're just pretty faces. I have been watching Much Music a lot recently, and I don't see any emotion in the music. People don't want to hear music from the heart. I want to change that."

"I really felt something special for Janis Joplin," Luba continues. "Technically, she had a flawed voice, but it contained so much emotion. I was only ten or eleven at the time, but I felt something special for her."

Luba appears at Dinwoodie this weekend.

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