

Music Sacra offers gifted holiday singing

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | December 21, 2004

CAMBRIDGE -- Under the direction of Mary Beekman, the chamber chorus Musica Sacra has achieved an elevated musical standard over a wide range of repertory from the Renaissance to the present. Saturday night they were in First Church Congregational for a program of seasonal music for chorus and brass instruments, mostly from the 16th and 17th centuries, but with the Boston premiere of a marvelous contemporary work as well, "A Mary Trilogy," by Gregg Smith.

Smith is probably better known as a choral conductor and arranger than as a composer; the Gregg Smith Singers have been pace setters for 50 years. But Smith has composed more than 400 works, mostly for chorus, and "A Mary Trilogy," written in 1988, makes this listener eager to hear more of them. The "Trilogy" offers linked settings for chorus, brass, and percussion of "Ave Maria," "Regina Coeli," and "Salve Regina."

These pieces are idiomatically and effectively written for singers and instruments, although the brasses are cast against type, more often reflective than celebratory. It was particularly interesting to hear them in the context of works by Praetorius, Scheidt, Hammerschmidt, Bassano, and Gabrieli on the rest of the program, because Smith is absorbed by the handling of compositional procedures as they were.

At the same time, he, like they, uses those procedures as tools to communicate the meanings and emotional implications of the texts. The performance got off to a rough start with a splattery brass entrance, but the rest of it was confident and expressive.

For this concert there were 29 singers supported unobtrusively by organist Nancy Granert; there were seven brass players, and Daryl Robbins played the flugelhorn interludes in the Smith work. Smiles of recognition greeted the appearance of ancient carols that are still sung, such as "How brightly shines the morning star" and the encore, "In dulci jubilo."

Beekman had trained the singers well: the tonal quality was pure and balanced; ensemble discipline was precise; intonation was exact; diction, clear. The technical challenges of the Smith work and of Gabrieli's "Magnificat" were resolutely met. And the aural halo that surrounded the performances was appropriate to the music and to the season.

Musica Sacra Mary Beekman, director
At: First Church Congregational in Cambridge, Saturday night ■