

entertainment

Choir gives unusual work its due dignity

By Kyle MacMillan, Denver Post Fine Arts Critic
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The Denver-Boulder metropolitan area is fortunate to be home to several strong a cappella chamber choirs.

Concerts by such vocal ensembles offer musical intimacy, vocal purity and often an adventuresome spirit not always associated with larger, better-known organizations.



Singers in the St. Martin's Chamber Choir rehearse in 2005. The a cappella group gave a powerful performance Sunday night at St. Elizabeth's Church in Denver to kick off its '07-08 season (Post / Brian Brainerd)

All those qualities were present Sunday evening at St. Elizabeth's Church, when one of Denver's most respected such groups, St. Martin's Chamber Choir, presented the second of two performances of its season-opening program.

The nimble, 21-voice group marked the 300th anniversary of the death of Dietrich Buxtehude. Though not exactly a household name, the composer was influential in the middle-baroque era, and his works are still frequently heard at organ recitals and choral concerts.

But because he wrote almost nothing for a cappella choir, he would seem an odd focus for St. Martin's, but that did not faze the group's talented, always imaginative artistic director and conductor Timothy Krueger.

"He stands in the middle of an era - the baroque - that began and ended with great flowerings of a capella music, and his debt to the earlier composers and the influence that he, in turn, exerted over the later ones is unquestionable," Krueger wrote.

This tack gave the conductor an excuse for a fascinating exploration of German-baroque treasures, including the ambitious program's virtually unknown centerpiece - Christoph Demantius' "Passion nach dem Evangelisten Johannes (Passion of St. John)."

This 30-minute antiphonal work, a kind of "motet Passion," is unusual on a number of fronts, including the composer's use of a trio of alto and two sopranos for the words of Pilate and a quartet of two tenors, bass and alto for the utterances of Jesus.

It is a powerful work, especially considering its compact scale. Krueger and the choir gave full voice to the work's inner drama and imbued it with appropriate dignity and depth.

Other highlights included the Magnificat No. 13 by Johann Pachelbel, who is too often only recognized for an over- played canon, and a spirited version of "Jauchzet dem Herrn, alle Welt," a motet by an unknown arranger.

The choir was in top form all evening, performing with superb intonation and impeccable blend and capturing the inner pulse and emotional urgency of these stirring works.

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