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Music Review: 'Radiance' is operative word for Illuminati performance

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The Illuminati Vocal Arts Ensemble presented "Radiance," a concert of choral music, Saturday at St. John's Episcopal Church in Northampton. The title proved to be a fitting one, for the program was distinguished by the bright sound of the group's 36 singers, led by artistic director Tony Thornton, an assistant music professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

The first half of the stellar program was devoted to the contemporary Estonian composer, Arvo Pärt (born, 1935), followed by a short motet by Beethoven. The second half featured works by English composer Herbert Howells, who died in 1983.

Pärt's motet, addressed to the Virgin Mary, sung in Estonian, began the program. It was brief, but sufficed to show the range of the chorus, for they sang it twice, the first time with full power, the second pianissimo, a much harder task, performed perfectly

One of Pärt's major vocal works, his "Magnificat" of 1989, sung in Latin, followed. While the chorus sang facing the audience, the soprano soloist, Susan Dillard, sang from the back of the darkened nave, moving up gradually to join the chorus in the chancel. At one point the sopranos began to lose altitude, but two small gestures from the conductor brought them up to the right pitch — a small but telling indication of the close relationship between the conductor and his singers. The "Magnificat" is a difficult work, full of unexpected changes of harmony and many dissonances. Only a chorus of gifted singers could sing it well, and this performance was immensely satisfying.

Beethoven's "Elegische Gesang" followed, a short motet for a good person recently dead. Here the chorus was joined by a string quartet which was not up to the task of interpreting the subtleties of late Beethoven, and the two violins, particularly, seemed to play without conviction, while their bowing was uncoordinated. Nevertheless the chorus sang the beautiful German words well and gave a sense of the gentle peace of "the return home of a heavenly spirit."

Two works of Herbert Howells (1892-1983) comprised the second half of the concert. First was his motet "Like as the hart desireth the waterbrooks," a setting of Psalm 42, accompanied by the organ, a fine instrument perfectly played by Grant Moss. There followed Howells' "Requiem," composed in 1945 as World War II was ending and at the time when Howells had turned to the exclusive composition of religious works. This requiem includes the prayer to the Saviour of the World (Salvator Mundi), settings of Psalms 23 and 121, ending with a setting of the words of Revelation, "I heard a voice from heaven."

In two places the opening words of the Latin requiem are sung, "Requiem aeternam dona eis" ("Grant them eternal rest"). This complex work is a glorious example of the English choral tradition as it was in the mid-20th century, after the stress of the second World War and the ruthless bombing of civilians, both in England and Germany. The Illuminati sang the work with an understanding of its underlying associations, and its performance was a solid and lovely ending to their vocal presentation.

The soloists, Katie Lipow (soprano), Peter Shea (tenor), and Tian Hui Ng (baritone) had a small but important part to sing, which they did impeccably: Ng's voice was especially pleasing. The performers were deservedly applauded by the large and enthusiastic audience, some of whom had traveled from as far away as Boston.

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