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Baker Festival Singers capture the human spirit in forceful requiem

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Special to The Star

The William Baker Festival Singers performed one of the greatest of all requiem Masses on Thursday evening in Kauffman Center's Helzberg Hall.

The program opened with Egil Hovland's glowing, softhearted "Stay With Us," sung in antiphon from either side of the hall's upper level.

Guest organist Herbert Buffington improvised an interesting solo organ fantasy based on the 9th century hymn "Veni, Creator Spiritus" — a tour de force that took full advantage of Western sacred music's power to reinvent itself again and again.

Maurice Durufle's Gregorian chant-based requiem, the evening's centerpiece, premiered in 1947 after six years of gestation. It's a tribute to the human spirit that such calm, ennobling and beautifully written music was produced when the worst carnage in European history to date was taking place all around it.

It's hard to know where to start praising the chorus's performance with Buffington, two vocal soloists, and 10 members of the Kansas City Symphony.

The introit opened with melodious viola, cello and organ scoring. Cellist Lawrence Figg deserves special mention here. The kyrie was smooth and flowing, and the chorus handled the great crescendo in the sanctus beautifully.

Mezzo-soprano Kristee Haney showed great tonal control in the pie Jesu, especially at the end, and baritone Joshua Lawlor sang his very brief solo with authority and feeling.

What came across Thursday night above all was the great warmth in this chorus's singing. It's almost like hearing a family.

It was an ecumenical evening. Perhaps the first half's Gregorian motifs were more familiar to Catholics in the audience, and the hymns comprising the rest of the program more familiar to non-Catholics.

Among the hymn tunes, Minnesota composer Charles Forsberg's joyous, almost gleeful "The Exaltation of Christ" carried forward the chorus's emotional engagement after the intermission.

Christine Freeman, associate music director, ably led an intricate, almost playful setting of Martin Rinkart's "Nun danket alle Gott" by Johann Pachelbel.

Adolphus Hailstork's "I Will Lift up Mine Eyes" gave Baker room to deploy his considerable expertise with spirituals and their children, and Byron Smith's "He'll Make a Way" was the most enjoyable stop-time boogie-woogie sacred music this reviewer has ever heard.

The concert honored the memory of local choral figure Kenneth Babcock, who died suddenly in January.

"Choral music has not had a better friend in Kansas City" than Babcock, Baker said.