

Nordic Voices Birmingham News Interview...

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Interview with Michael Huebner of the
Birmingham News 10/19/03

Nordic Voices more than just words, music

Listeners are well advised to listen closely to the words at a Nordic Voices concert.

Some texts are Norwegian, of course, and others are Latin, German and Swedish, so you may have to follow along with the translations. Still others, such as Henrik Hellstenius' "Fragments," aren't words at all; they're more like percussive noises.

"We think it's important to distinguish between using text as something that makes sense and something that's just an effect," said soprano Tone Braaten last week from New York, where the a cappella sextet was starting its U.S. tour. "The 'Fragments' use words, but they don't always make sense."

The Norwegian ensemble will present several works from a new CD titled "Sense and nonSense" today at Cathedral Church of the Advent, as well as traditional Nordic music and newly composed pieces. The program straddles centuries of music history, often pitting modern sounds and syllables against the easier listening of Gregorian chant and 19th- and early 20th-century music.

Three of Hellstenius' "Fragments" will be interspersed throughout the concert. Each of the series breaks words and sentences down to their basic vowels and consonants. They're typical fare for Nordic Voices' concerts, which blend ancient and modern, sacred and profane. Gregorian chant may be found on the same program as the "klukk - klukk - klukk" of a hen.

"We like to come up with new concepts, and we're happy with the type of program that's on the CD. It's got beautiful music, it's got humor and it's got more serious things."

The sextet has presented innovative programming since 1996, along the way earning acclaim from New York to South Africa. Their vocal style is patterned after ensembles such as the Monteverdi Choir, Anonymous 4 and Chanticleer - emphasizing spare vibrato and a focus on purity and blend.

Each singer has considerable opera, oratorio and solo symphonic experience as well. Among their collective repertoire are Mozart, Bach, Orff, Handel, Duruflé and Faure, but the singers' veneration for their native Scandinavia comes through in this program.



Artist Management

In one offering, Bo Holten's "Nordic Suite," the texts take a nostalgic look at rural life - the slow passage of time, the green valleys, longing for a lost love.

"It's a medley of folk songs from Nordic countries," Braaten said. "One is from Norway, one from Finland and one from Sweden."

Most of the concert's first half is devoted to sacred music and Mass settings, from Bjarne Slogedal's "Herre Jesus gi meg nade" ("Lord Jesus, Have Mercy on Me") to three settings of religious texts by Max Reger.

After the break, things lighten considerably. Three pieces in Goffredo Petrassi's "Nonsense" series sing of a young lady with a growing nose, a despairing old man and an old maid caught in a crowd. Songs by Wilhelm Stenhammar reflect longingly on evening breezes, a spring garden and family dreams.

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