

Nordic Voices

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Nordic Voices group showcases Norwegian composers at National Gallery of Art

By Charles T. Downey
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The six-voice a cappella ensemble Nordic Voices performed at the National Gallery of Art Sunday evening, in a concert of contemporary music co-sponsored by the Norwegian Embassy. These new pieces by Norwegian composers thankfully avoided the trend among some choral composers toward overly saccharine holy minimalism. With a group like Nordic Voices, composers can stretch their legs more, even if some of this music is unlikely to sound as good performed by anyone else.

The plainchant setting of Henrik Ødegaard's "Ubi caritas" was sometimes reminiscent of Duruflé's beloved arrangement, but he also reordered the text of the refrain in ways that changed the meaning into a question. Percussive consonants distilled from the text of Ødegaard's more challenging "Ave verum corpus" evoked the spitting and wounding of Christ's passion, and the six singers added whistling to create phantom harmonies. In two pieces composed especially for Nordic Voices, Lasse Thoresen incorporated not only Norwegian folk song but the otherworldly sounds of Asian overtone chanting.

Other than a few raspy attacks, the singing was extremely refined, balanced, nuanced, and impeccably in tune. In particular, first soprano Tone Elisabeth Braaten stood out for the laserlike accuracy of her hitting of the "Gloria." Most of the charm of Thoresen's "Tvetrall," which closed the concert, came in the bumbling, self-deprecating introduction by baritone Frank Havrøy. A wordless seduction and confrontation between the male and female voices, the piece added up to extremely virtuosic nonsense, which was probably quite fun to perform, if overlong for the listener.

The Norway Comes to Washington festival continue sound, even when driven repeatedly into the stratosphere by Gisle Kverndokk's frantic se s next Sunday at the National Gallery, with the world premiere of a new children's opera by Kverndokk.