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Robert Bode (photo: Peter Hunsberger)

Seattle's Choral Arts, under Robert Bode, has won two national awards this year.

Concert preview

'Stillness, Divide My Dream: Choral Music of William Hawley'

By Choral Arts, 7 p.m. Friday, St. Mark's Cathedral, 1245 10th Ave. E., Seattle, and 7 p.m. Saturday, Bastyr Chapel at Bastyr University, 14500 Juanita Drive N.E., Kenmore; \$18-\$23 each (800-838-3006 or brownpapertickets.com).

Seattle's Choral Arts, under Robert Bode, is on a roll

By Michael Upchurch

Seattle Times arts writer

This is proving quite a year for Seattle's Choral Arts.

The group's most recent CD, "Mornings Like This," won the newly established American Prize in Choral Performance (community division). It was their first recording with artistic director Robert Bode (pronounced "Bo-dee"), now in his fourth year with the ensemble.

Choral Arts also won Chorus America's 2010 Margaret Hillis Award for Choral Excellence which, Bode explains, takes into account the ensemble's "organizational strength, financial strength and educational-outreach program, as well as musical excellence."

You can see some of that excellence on display at two concerts this weekend, in a program composed entirely of works by American composer William Hawley. Its title, "Stillness, Divide My Dream," is drawn from a poem by Louise Bogan, whose writings supply the text for "O Remember," a Hawley piece newly commissioned by Choral Arts. In January, the concert selections will be recorded for a CD.

It's unusual for a chorus to concentrate so exclusively on one composer — so why Hawley?

"William Hawley is a really terrific composer," Bode enthused in an interview at St. Mark's Cathedral earlier this week. Bode estimates that works by Hawley have appeared on more than 30 recordings. "However,

there has never been a CD devoted entirely to his choral music."

The Bode-Hawley connection came about two years ago when Hawley heard a concert recording of Choral Arts doing his "Six Dickinson Settings" (a cappella settings of half-a-dozen Emily Dickinson poems).

"He was very complimentary," Bode recalls. "He said that I understood his music beautifully, and if ever we wanted to do something together, he would jump at the chance."

That's when Bode pitched him the all-Hawley choral concert/CD idea.

In a rehearsal of the Dickinson piece, one can hear what pleased its composer — and see how Hawley's work would appeal to Bode and Choral Arts. While Hawley's training was with avant-garde composers, including Morton Feldman and Harold Budd, his choral compositions offer fugues and twinings of vocal sound that are transparently beautiful.

Bode and Choral Arts have an unusual set-up for a Seattle community chorus, in that Bode doesn't live here. Until this past August, he was on faculty at Whitman College in Walla Walla, where for 24 years he was choral director. Recently he was lured to the Conservatory of Music and Dance at the University of Missouri in Kansas City. When approached by UMKC, Bode said he was happy in Walla Walla — "and I have this chorus in Seattle."

His contact told him: "I know all about that. We want you to continue doing that. That's important for us. That has a national reputation."

Indeed, Bode says, Seattle's whole local choral scene has a national reputation: "There are so many choruses that operate at such a high level."

How does he keep up with the Seattle scene, if he doesn't live here?

"I make it a point when I'm here to hear as much music as I can. Sometimes I just make specific trips to come listen to music and spend time with my colleagues."

Like many local choral ensembles, Choral Arts has very little turnover. "I think people find a group that resonates with them, and they love the experience, and they stay with that chorus."

In Choral Arts' case, the relatively small size of the group — 27 or 28 singers — results in a focus on chamber-choral literature.

"I take great pride in the fact that they sing Bach beautifully, as well as 21st-century composers. Probably people who've known Choral Arts for years would associate it with a certain sort of European sound and a romantic sort of repertory. I'm proud that we've expanded that, without any loss of quality. So I like to say that we're 'nicheless.' "

With their record label, Orcas-based Gothic, recently teaming up with the internationally distributed Naxos label, their "nichelessness" looks like it's going places.

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