

Lionheart enchants with spiritual song

By JOSEPH DALTON, Special to the Times Union

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TROY -- Like monks heading to chapel, the six male singers in Lionheart processed onto the stage of the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall while singing at a moderate pace the folk song "Wayfaring Stranger." The hourlong concert, presented by the Troy Chromatics, maintained the reverent atmosphere and went by in seemingly one breath, since there was no intermission and applause was held until the end.

The members of Lionheart -- two tenors, two baritones, a countertenor and a bass -- sing with a velvety tone and function like one entity. Nobody conducted or even shrugged his shoulders to indicate a tempo, breath or dynamic, yet their unity of intonation, pronunciation and interpretation was flawless and very beautiful.

The largest work on the program was contemporary French composer Marc-Andre Dalbavie's "Chants" to the poetry of Ezra Pound. It alternated between being slow and ponderous or wildly scattered and layered. But there was always a sheen of elegance and restraint. A nearly continuous pedal point, or held tone, evoked the image of a huge but shallow reflecting pool. As the poetry put it, "sound drifts in the evening haze."

A majority of selections on the program came from the 13th through 16th centuries, and was thus mostly religious in nature. The verses in "Guade virgo," an anonymous piece from around 1200, began with a hollow but florid harmony before settling into a traditional unison chant style. In other pieces, the simple harmonies were almost visceral.

The sequence of pieces loosely traced the development of Western harmony, but it was the progress of the soul that united the larger program. Thoughts and images of the afterlife kept coming up. This was underscored by two reprises of "Wayfaring Stranger," in varied and imaginative arrangements. Each of its verses ends, "I'm just a-going home."

"And when I die," by the late folk diva Laura Nyro, made for a welcome visit into the vernacular. Yet interpolated into the group's already clever setting of the song was the "Dies Irae," taken from the Latin Requiem Mass. "Pie Jesu" ("Sweet Jesus"), also from the Requiem, was the concluding strain.

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Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union.

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