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Choir concert was memorable

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Those of us who believe that music is - almost always - best heard live have many arguments in our arsenals. There is the electricity that comes with a performance that's really "on"; there's the opportunity to hear familiar artists in works new to them. And to be a part of the audience is to be a part of the performance and contribute to its energy, or lack thereof.

Sunday afternoon's performance by Choir of Clare College, Cambridge, at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis offered another good reason to climb out of one's comfy chair: the chance to hear a work in an acoustical setting almost impossible to replicate with a home sound system. The concert's centerpiece and high point was the Messe Solennelle by Louis Vierne, a true sonic spectacular.

Vierne's quasi-operatic Mass setting is scored for choir and two organs; the choir headed (in slow procession) for the loft in the back of the nave and then sang with admirable passion and accuracy. The synchronization between the choir, the big organ (in the sanctuary) and the little organ (in the loft) was impeccable; the interplay and coordination were incredible, and the overall effect was stunning.

The program, this season's initial offering by St. Louis Cathedral Concerts, was musically varied, with works ranging from a trio of motets by Thomas Tallis to an uncommonly thoughtful and intriguing organ piece by Nico Muhly. Muhly's "Hudson Preludes" was dedicated to its performer, senior organ scholar James McVinnie. Muhly, who writes for the organ in a non-bombastic fashion, is a composer to watch. McVinnie gave the piece an intelligent and engaged performance.

The bulk of the selections were written for cathedral traditions, and those tended to work best in this setting. Diction could have been better throughout, but only in Britten's "O Deus, ego amo te" and Nicholas Maw's "One foot in Eden" were the provided texts necessary.

There were a few small sins of commission and omission on the part of the choir and organists, but the generous reverb of the Cathedral Basilica forgave most. Once director of music Timothy Brown and the choir got the hang of the space's timing in the first Tallis motet, everything else was paced appropriately. This was choral singing to be cherished for its blend, subtlety and nuance, its exquisite diminuendos and its ravishingly floated soprano lines, making for a memorable afternoon.