

Late Night

CONCERT REVIEW

Choir celebrates joy of Christmas

By Jay Harvey
STAFF WRITER

J.S. Bach's devout focus on the afterlife in his sacred music didn't keep him from celebrating the here and now — especially when the text had to do with Christmas, the greatest symbol for Christians of joy in an earthly event and its promise for humanity's salvation.

This was the spirit that let the Indianapolis Arts Chorale's performance of the cantata *Christen, atzet diesen Tag* ("Christians, atch this day") fit properly in a program largely consisting of shorter, generally more familiar evocations of Christmas. The communal feeling generated by the choir's sharing of *O Come, All Ye Faithful* with the audience in the first half was explicitly confirmed by Bach's more studied, intricate music after intermission.

Eric Stark led the chorale in the second concert of its 27th season at St. John Catholic Church, with splendid assistance in two Bach cantatas from the Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra. Four student singers from Butler University gave well-schooled accounts of the solos and duets in *Christen* and in the short cantata appended to it for this concert, *Gloria in excelsis*

Indianapolis Arts Chorale

★★★ **Where:** St. John Catholic Church.
When: Saturday night.

Star ratings: ★★★★★ excellent, ★★★ good, ★★ fair, ★ poor

Deo.

More heft in these young voices would have been welcome, but that light-voiced quality carried over to the older voices in the chorale as well. Much can be said for consistency, and the flowing, soft-edged vocal sound characteristic of the performance had its undeniable charms.

Yet, at 42 strong, the choir needed to be stronger at times. The section-by-section entrances on *et nunc and semper* ("and now and ever") in the final chorus carry more of the text's meaning when they are fully assertive. But by this point there were some signs of fatigue in the generally sturdy ensemble, which had strained to keep the long lines in the *Gloria's* first chorus firm.

The Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra, a hard-working and ubiquitous group these days, provided nicely textured support for the singers, with fine oboe and flute obbligati in a couple of the duets, and pealing trumpets riding the full-orchestra crest in the big choruses.

Its introduction to the final chorus of *Christen* got off to a rough

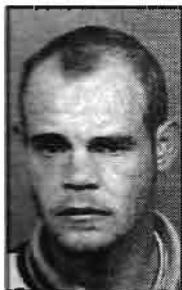
start, a factor perhaps of the score's ingenious combination of rapid, ornate accompaniment and slow-moving, dignified chorus. Once this balance became clear, it could be enjoyed as another example of how Bach took aspects of the Italian music of his time and filtered them through his North German sensibility.

The concert opened with a harmonically soothing, rhythmically exciting African carol, *Bethlehemu*, which immediately displayed the chorale's ripe but unforced tone. Stark also conducted a Malcolm Sargent arrangement of *Silent Night* notable for the way phrases seemed to vanish precisely into thin air instead of being cut off.

There's music that benefits from crisp phrasing, but *Silent Night* isn't part of it. The same goes for *Still, Still, Still*, in Norman Luboff's dreamy arrangement, which the chorale sang superbly.

Even *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*, often performed with such obvious accents that the listener wants to say "Gesundheit," glowed with the sort of expansive good cheer that didn't get in your face.

Founding director Elise Marshall was on hand to conduct a tender version of *The Coventry Carol*, and assistant conductor Karen Cooksey smartly led another cappella number, *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*. John T. Lowe Jr. was an effective accompanist in several pieces on organ and piano.



James Hibbard

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his years after Albaugh answered Maxie's knock on the door, the justices issued their ruling.

"We find no evidence that Albaugh's decision to drive the truck was anything other than the product of Deputy Maxie's

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