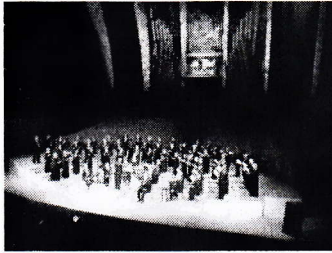


Festival Singers honor a choral music hero

By [Sarah Tyrrell](#) Tue, Apr 16, 2013



Kansas City audiences know a good choral performance when they hear one and these seasoned listeners appreciated the effort that the William Baker Festival Singers put forth Thursday in the Kenneth C. Babcock Memorial Concert. Babcock, who died in January, was a long-time member of the Summer Singers of Kansas City and a tireless supporter of choral music.



William Baker is fearless, crazy, or a bit of both. The sheer quantity of music presented would frighten most singers, but add to that a healthy dose of difficult, and some vocalists would make a run for it. The Festival Singers, though, were in it for the long haul, performing Duruflé's *Requiem*, Op. 9, along with ten additional pieces (all but the Duruflé committed to memory), a tremendous amount of music.

With subtle prompts, Baker gets impressive results from this all-volunteer group. They are focused, accurate, and energetic, with impressive intonation across a varied repertoire. The concert opened with Hovland's *Stay With Us*; though challenged by a spatial formation, the ensemble immediately struck a lyrical blend, aside from one soprano stand-out. Guest organist Herbert Buffington then improvised on *Veni creator Spiritu*, revealing the personality of the Julia Irene Kauffman Casavant organ. Its placement in the hall is visually stunning: reflective lighting and the "floating" platform are mesmerizing, and since the organ is still unknown to many Kansas Citians, it was a fine idea to feature the instrument that is sort of the elephant in the room. Buffington

deftly exposed the instrument's capabilities, working the 9th-century hymn "in the spirit of Duruflé" on an organ built to reflect the French romantic tradition. Cozy Helzberg Hall makes for an intimate experience for organ solo, and Buffington's piece was effective in shape, color, and detail.

Duruflé's *Requiem* is a stunning composition and a remarkable achievement for a composer plagued with self-doubt. An organist by trade, Duruflé studied diligently in Paris but his output is scant, making this comprehensive mass setting all the more precious. Baker chose the 1961 version of the *Requiem*, for chorus and chamber orchestra.

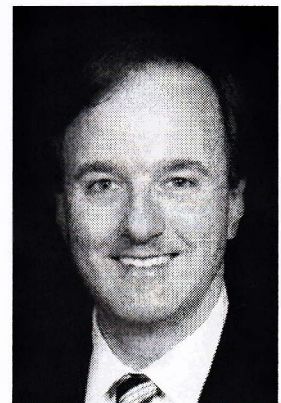
The Introit is mild and the singers found a lovely balance across sections. Baker coaxed sensitive dynamic gradations while the men shone in warm, conjunct melodies derivative of chant, the genre that so fascinated Duruflé. The following Kyrie requires concentration for the winding, linear lines. More distinct "K" consonants would have better set off the fugal passages, but solid soprano entrances helped identify each individual line in Duruflé's well-crafted counterpoint.

The ominous opening of the Domine Jesu Christe featured fine accompanying musicians in the Buffington/Figg pairing (organ/cello). The triumphant transition in this section set up the sort of "static versus kinetic" aesthetic that marks the movement sequence to follow. Juxtaposing calm lyricism with animated metrical passages was perhaps Duruflé's way of reconciling the desire to anchor the mass in chant with his urge to set certain texts to more measured rhythms. Throughout this movement, spirited rhythms banter with leisurely, ethereal melodic content, and baritone soloist Joshua Lawlor added an austere, vivid layer.

The Sanctus movement again demonstrated the competence of the treble sections. The women sang in an almost hushed tone, which beautifully offset the organ's rushing lines. The men matched wits with the brass, a stellar trumpet trio featuring Keith Benjamin, Dustin Williams, and Patrick Doyle. Together, these forces shaped a fantastic "in excelsis" climax. The Pie Jesu meant a return to the static, and Kristee Haney's solo was a plaintive, repetitive plea, sensitively rendered—nothing gratuitous here, just carefully wrought descending melodic lines with a vibrato appropriate to this repertoire. Kudos to Haney for remaining unruffled during the cellist's score-finding expedition.

Streaming organ ripples and understated syncopation breathed life back into the moment for the Agnus Dei. The string complement matched perfectly the tenor entrances, and the sopranos found real footing here in a crystal blend. This movement rivaled the In Paradisum (where the sopranos were perfectly angelic) for some of the most beautiful moments of the piece.

Duruflé called for an energetic pulse in the Libera me (to which he added the "Dies irae" text), but the basses needed more buoyancy to propel this more specific metrical pattern. Lawlor's solo was muffled under the brass, and the men, even though singing with an agitated tone to match the text about judgment and fire, still were lost in the thicker instrumental texture (and since Duruflé was ultra-careful about balance, we cannot blame his scoring). The women again rocked the high transparent passages near the end.



Post-intermission brought a diverse set of 20th-century compositions (and, oddly, Pachelbel's *Nun danket alle Gott* thrown in). Gretchaninov's *Praise the Lord, O My Soul* was boisterous but a bit sloppy. Phrase endings were clipped for the sake of the breath needed to start the next phrase, and I sensed that Baker wanted to push the tempo. *The Exaltation of Christ* by Charles Forsberg is demanding and can expose weak spots in even the best ensembles. The chorus muddled some of the winding melismas. The "K" on "cross," was, however, an explosive consonant that caught everyone's attention, and the bass section bottomed out beautifully on "under the Earth," reveling in Forsberg's gorgeous text painting.

Nun danket alle Gott, conducted by Christine Freeman, seemed out of place and a bit dull. The antiphonal realization made sense and Freeman certainly plied some suitable dynamic changes from the singers. The tempo was brisk but not too fast so as to weaken the melismatic lines, which was appreciated. This group indeed manages German diction well. Oddly, many of the women were swaying to the motoric baroque meter, and that physical movement that was distracting for this repertoire.

Baker honored Doug Helvering with a stellar performance of *A Faint Display of Heaven*, a thoughtful setting of Charlotte Richardson's text. The ensemble handled well the beautiful dissonances and jagged melodic lines, but the men were timid on entrances. The last set was *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*, three Psalm settings by Adolphus Hailstork. Pam Winn brought pure and natural emotion to the solo, and by movement 3, "The Lord is My Shepherd," Winn had really refined her pitch accuracy. At the piano, Wayne Smith contributed much in this set; the repeating pitch in "How Long?" was a relentless "clock" that finally gave way to raw spontaneity; the audience loved the emotional outbursts at the end of the piece. With an apparent second wind, the singers offered up *He'll Make a Way* for a rousing finale.

I appreciate music directors who continually challenge singers as well as audiences, and the commitment to both was clear in bringing the Duruflé to life. The Festival Singers made a worthwhile contribution to the Kansas City choral scene with this performance. Happily, there is a chance to again hear the Duruflé masterpiece, within just few weeks, when The Kansas City Chorale performs the organ-only version on May 24 with Jan Kraybill.

REVIEW:

William Baker Festival Singers

The Kenneth C. Babcock Memorial Masterworks Concert

Thursday, April 11, 2013

Helzberg Hall, Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts

1601 Broadway Blvd., Kansas City, MO

For tickets call 913-403-9223 or online at www.festivalsingers.org

Top Photo: William Baker Festival Singers performing in Helzberg Hall