

## Choir makes poetry come alive

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The words of Shakespeare, Robert Frost and Leonard Cohen came to life last night at the Living Arts Centre as the Mississauga Festival Choir delivered *Poetry through Music*, the thoroughly impressive final concert of their 2009-2010 season.

The concert featured famous poems set to music, and marked a breakthrough performance for the beloved community choir. The approximately 70 singers under the baton of David Ambrose engaged their audience with a pleasing blend of spot-on harmonies, emotional depth, and energetic delivery. The choir took advantage of the sonorous acoustics of the RBC Theatre, showing off terrific dynamic range.

Ambrose, sporting golden treble clef cufflinks that sparkled under the spotlight, said backstage he wanted to challenge his choristers with difficult repertoire as he concluded his fifth season as artistic director.

Intense literary debates would break out at rehearsals over the interpretation of the poems' cryptic verses.

"Working with the text has been the biggest thing. I mean, we sing words all the time, but when you realize you're dealing with such heavy poetry, it's how do we get into it and bring the music into it?" he said.

The program opened with a contrasting suite of seven Robert Frost poems set to music by 20th-century composer Randall Thompson, featuring sublime accompaniment from pianist Andrea Grant. The choir sounded at ease with the difficult material, including the stirring *The Road Not Taken* and the slow-building *Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening*, featuring tenors and basses.

But the standouts were the women, who dazzled with two pieces that were alternately jaunty and ethereal.

"I liked the banter back and forth between the sopranos and altos – it was like they were singing to each other," said concertgoer Regan Hooper, referring to the spirited Frost selection, *A Girl's Garden*.

The choir saved their best singing for arguably the best poet of them all: William Shakespeare. They performed three songs taken from the Bard's plays – ranging from a breezy swing number to a gripping meditation on loss – with excellent tonal quality, unhurried pacing, and lots of feeling.

There was a nod to homegrown troubadours with heartfelt, up tempo spins through classics *Both Sides Now* by Joni Mitchell, *Northwest Passage* by folk legend Stan Rogers, and Leonard Cohen's ubiquitous *Hallelujah*. A quick survey of world poetry – including Kahlil Gibran's powerful *O Music* – put the finishing touch on a full and satisfying show.

Last night's musical missteps were very few, making it easy to forget that this is an un auditioned group. After a compelling season finale, it will be interesting to see what this inventive choir comes up with next year.



**Playing along.** Andrea Grant accompanies the Mississauga Festival Choir yesterday afternoon at the RBC Theatre in the Living Arts Centre during their *Poetry through Music* concert. The afternoon performance was a mixture of both song and poetry read by Michael MacAdam. *Photo by Steven Der-Garabedian*

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