

Sadako Prayers of Peace' a compelling concoction

Music review: Contemporary Vocal Ensemble, Musicians and Others

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Herald-Times Reviewer

October 25, 2006

Actually, Sunday afternoon's performance in Auer Hall of an oratorio called "Sadako Prayers of Peace" was a world premiere. Officially, that's to come on Saturday in Chicago as highlight of a two-day extravaganza involving a host of Chicago-based new music organizations.

The same performers - the women of IU's Contemporary Vocal Ensemble, baritone Gregory Brookes, and a contingent of instrumentalists - are doing the actual and the official, under the guidance of Stephen Burns. Burns, a former member of the IU Jacobs School of Music faculty, now serves as artistic director of Chicago's Fulcrum Point New Music Project, the outfit putting together that big performance event in the Windy City this coming weekend.

What one heard on Sunday was an often compelling concoction of texts in several languages (Italian, Japanese, Latin, English) set to contemporary vocal styles, the creation of Kevin James, a composer whose career features projects meant to serve or honor children, particularly those in crisis. It is children who inhabit the center of "Sadako Prayers of Peace." The work is built around poetry written by Japanese who were young innocents when they experienced the bombing of Hiroshima. __Only those who know the Japanese tongue, which this reviewer doesn't, are likely to gain the full dynamic of the content, words such as these, in translation: "In the riverbed the water rises, comes full, covers arms, covers legs, salt water seeps into the countless open wounds of people who no longer move."

But James' music alone goes far in establishing the necessary atmosphere, a blend of fear and grief, anger and hope. The instrumentalists wander through a disturbing landscape of musical bits and pieces suggestive of ruins, of a landscape made barren, of material things left broken. The singers express loss and a how-could-it-happen amazement in a score that calls for speech and singing and whispers and screams. One heard staccato utterings, atonal ramblings, explosive bursts, moments of a quiet symbolic of resignation, even touches of lyricism as the text addresses a hope for peace.

Remarkably, all of these somehow came together. There was an emotional unity to what one heard and a strange beauty in how the performing musicians brought the oratorio to fruition. Conductor Burns, of course, had fire in his belly about the work. But he also, quite obviously, managed to convince his players and singers that what composer James had wrought deserved their full devotion. They responded with the passion of believers.