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LOCAL NEWS

Musica Sacra pays homage to Mozart's 'Requiem'

By Candi Carter / Chronicle Staff
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For the members of Cambridge-based Musica Sacra, every note may be worthy of worship, but their own egos get sacrificed on the altar of good musicianship before every rehearsal.

When the small but elite group performs what is arguably some of the most sublime religious music ever written this Saturday - Mozart's "Requiem" and "Vespers" - they're hoping the reverent music will make the hairs on the back of listeners' necks stand straight on end.

"It's not every week that you can plan guaranteed Saturday-night chills," said 32-year-old soprano Elana Messer.

Musica Sacra has been in Cambridge since 1958. Mary Beekman, the group's current musical director, has been with the group since 1979. Every singer in the group is there by audition, which has kept it small and intimate for both performers and audience members.

"Music exists to communicate, not just to be to be performed," Beekman said.

Beekman said the group's small numbers limited musical choices. She waited for years for the chance to do Mozart "Requiem," and this year's group is finally large enough and strong enough to support the work, she said.

"I would say for the last five years I've been really able to build on the momentum that the last year achieved," Beekman said. "The people remaining the group have set a standard that the others have seen they needed to meet.

Mozart's "Requiem," with its dark Dies Eri, is one of the world's best-known and most well-loved pieces of choral music. It's was the last piece Mozart wrote before he died, and the deep, pulling melodies and sometimes eerie, often mystical harmonies reflect his fear of death and uncertainty about his own salvation. Mozart never managed to finish the work before he died. It was completed by his pupil Franz Süssmeyr.

"The first time I heard the 'Requiem,' I was at a concert, and I was totally involved," said Anne Madura, a 22-year-old alto in her second year with the group. "It's something that anyone can enjoy."

The "Vespers" are a simpler set of pieces, although no less difficult. The vesper service is traditionally performed in the Catholic Church right before sundown. Mozart composed his second setting of the Vespers after the death of his mother, and they follow the dictums of church music requiring choral works avoid the overbearing operatic style. The final movement of Mozart's "Vespers," the Laudate Dominum, is the movement that draws the most ears with its ephemeral soprano solo line.

Musica Sacra members said their group is unique because they work hard, but they play just as hard. And they're all friends united by their love of music and each other.

"We take the music very seriously, but we don't take ourselves very seriously, and that's a hard combination to find," Messer said.

Kimball Halsey, a 41-year-old tenor who's been singing with the group for two years, said that connection comes through in concerts as a more polished, professional and exciting concert.

"There are just a lot of people who are passionate about music and passionate about singing, and I think that comes through," Halsey said.

Besides the Musica Sacra choral ensemble, Saturday night's concert will feature soloists soprano Janet Brown, mezzo-soprano Mary Westbrook-Geha, tenor Mark Kagan, and bass Mark Andrew Cleveland. The Orchestra of Emmanuel Music will accompany the group.

"If [the Dies Eri] doesn't give you chills, then something's wrong," said Ian Mulvaney, a 31-year-old tenor. "We like what we're doing and we want the audience to like what we're doing and feel the feelings of what we're doing."

Musica Sacra

Musica Sacra performs Mozart Saturday, Oct. 26 at 8 p.m. at the First Congregational Church, 1 Garden Street. Tickets are \$20 for preferred seating, \$15 for general admission and \$12 for seniors and students. For more information, visit www.musicasacra.org or call 617-349-3400.

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Musica Sacra practices Mozart's 'Requiem' at the First Congregational Church. The local group will perform the piece, along with Mozart's 'Vespers' Saturday at 8 p.m. (Photo by Zara Tzanev)

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