

Nordic Voices, China Post, Aug 2004

A perfect blend of laughter and tears

By Aventura King

When Ingrid Hanken, a soprano of the Nordic Voices, opened their performance with the following declaration: "Some of our modern songs can be funny, so if you feel the urge to, please laugh." -- she wasn't joking. Thursday night, at this Norwegian choir's performance, one of the events of Taipei's international choral festival, humor could have been written in bold red letters on the program. The comical vein was not constant however, but scattered in fragments across the two-hour varied program. The evening was an alternation of modern and traditional arrangements of Norwegian folk songs, sacred music and music that wasn't music.

The humor was most prevalent in these "unmusical" pieces, compositions of Henrik Hellstenius entitled Fragments. The four Fragments were evenly distributed across the performance. Before each interpretation, the six members of the choir scattered themselves across the stage. Doing so endowed them with the space for their exaggerated movements both of the body and of the features. Indeed, Henrik Hellstenius's compositions not only involved the singing and speaking voice, but the singer's hands and feet.

Fragment two began with what seemed either an on-stage finger-snapping contest or a grotesque parody of a Spanish dance. It then jumped into a muddle of vocal exclamations punctuated by feet-stamping and hand-clapping. Finally the agitation simmered down as a progressively slowing rubbing of the palms silenced the fragment. The members held their last poses for a half a minute after the end of the piece. The alto, twitched her head and eyes around as if in fear of a predator, the bass, leaned to one side, his face slanted by a mephistophelian grin.

Later fragments gradually built into shouting and cries of indignation. Though very different, all four compositions had at least two things in common. First, throughout all of them, not one note is sung. Secondly, each one was followed by a combination of laughter and hearty applause from the audience. Though the fragments and the other modern pieces were the hardest to perform and orchestrate (they were the only ones which required conducting from one of the members), the applause was mostly directed toward the humor and not the unapparent difficulty of the pieces.

Of course, there were ovations which reacted to the beauty of the singing, the purity of choral voices such as soprano Ingrid Hanken's or alto Ebba Rydh's. These "traditional" qualities surfaced in Thomas Luis de Victoria's Lamentations, a musical setting of the lamentations of Jeremiah from the Bible. During this interpretation the richness of the Nordic Voices flooded the immensity of the concert hall.

At other times, their voices gently alighted on the silence and soothingly vibrated along with it. This was the case with their two last encores, a lullaby, and "a song that describes your lover's first kiss" declared the blushing baritone, Frank Havroy. With a wide smile he added: "I hope everyone here can remember their first kiss." Even if that weren't the case, the song left everyone in the audience with the perfect blend of sensations reminiscent of this emotional experience, a mixture as varied and delightful as the evening's performance...