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MUSIC

San Antonio Chamber Choir shines in CSU concert

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The Cleveland Contemporary Players may sound like an ensemble, but it isn't. The organization -- brainstorm of Cleveland State University composer Andrew Rindfleisch -- imports major performers in the contemporary-music world to work with CSU students and give concerts.

This week's visitor was the San Antonio Chamber Choir, which gave an illuminating concert Monday at CSU's Drinko Recital Hall. Scott MacPherson has molded his professional group of 24 singers into a remarkable unit that performs everything a cappella as if challenges didn't exist.

One toot on MacPherson's pitch pipe is all the Texas choir needs to begin its odyssey through myriad expressive and harmonic worlds. The voices seem to fear no hurdle of interval, balance, blend or intonation. MacPherson makes sure words come across as lucidly as tricky rhythms and nuances.

The choir spent most of Monday's program in the 20th and 21st centuries, stepping into the distant past only at the start for Johannes Brahms' motet "Warum ist das Licht gegeben." Phrases emerged as inevitable extensions of previous statements. The choral sonority was glowing, urgent and never forced.

In a movement from Christian Ridil's "Nachts," the ensemble managed the layered textures and harmonic pungencies suavely. The choristers' exceptional qualities must have thrilled two CSU students whose short compositions had their first hearings: Stephen Walter's "Hymn," a lovely unfolding of rapt utterances, and Aaron Carman's "In manus tuas," whose alternation of low and high chants sung over drones evokes an aura of exultant spirituality.

The choir's French was excellent in three of Paul Hindemith's "Six Chansons," and its sense of pitch and dynamics effortless in R. Murray Shafer's "Epitaph for Moonlight." MacPherson and company even evinced a collective sense of humor in Manfred Langer's "Act Up!," which found the singers arrayed casually to declaim a counterpoint of banal comments.

They caressed the anguish in Norman Dinerstein's "When David Heard," while Aaron Copland's "Las Agachadas" exuded spicy appeal, and Dominick Argento's "In Praise of Apollo" received bright treatment.

Two of the night's pieces revealed the ability of CSU's Rindfleisch to probe sacred texts in multihued, iridescent writing. The subject of "Graue Liebesschlangen" may not be tantalizing (the title translates "Gray Love-snakes"), but the slithering harmonies and juxtaposition of flowing and animated lines make it a work of uncommon appeal.

And a gorgeous Rindfleisch encore, "Veni Sancte Spiritus," found the choir reveling in the score's bell-like statements and gentle dissonances.

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