

SPCO's opener a stirring tribute

BY ROB HUBBARD

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If it weren't for Felix Mendelssohn, you may never have heard of Johann Sebastian Bach. Had the relatively obscure Bach not been extolled so avidly by Mendelssohn in the mid-19th century, what Bach works we know may have joined the ranks of the many that have disappeared.

If it weren't for conductor Nicholas McGegan and the programming powers of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, you may never have heard of Mendelssohn's Symphony-Cantata, "Hymn of Praise." Created for an 1840 celebration in Bach's home city of Leipzig, it's rarely performed nowadays. But Friday night's SPCO concert likely left those in attendance wondering where this work has been all their lives. Overflowing with emotional power and exquisite melodies, this neglected masterpiece proved an epiphany. And the passionate performance by the orchestra, the VocalEssence Chorus and three gifted vocal soloists made Friday's the most memorable opening concert in several seasons.

Closing a week in which the death of tenor Luciano Pavarotti brought many back in touch with the profundities that the human voice can provide, this concert was a moving, exhilarating experience that made the Ordway Center seem more like a cathedral than it has in quite some time. For that, one can thank the brilliantly blended harmonies of the VocalEssence Chorus and the pure, passionate solos of sopranos Christina Pier and Mary Wilson, and particularly the gentle power of tenor Thomas Cooley.

Each aria Cooley delivered was magnetic, but never more so than during a dark night of the soul that concluded with Pier offering a soaring solo of comfort from the third balcony. The transporting moment propelled the piece toward a stirring "Hallelujah" chorus that compelled the opening-night audience to its feet.

Excerpts from an incomplete opera by Beethoven proved a far more subdued curtain raiser, possessing a somewhat academic feel that was stripped away by the explosive and inspiring Mendelssohn.

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Who: The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra with conductor Nicholas McGegan, sopranos Christina Pier and Mary Wilson, tenor Thomas Cooley and the VocalEssence Chorus

What: Works by Beethoven and Mendelssohn

When: 8 p.m. today

Where: Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, 345 Washington St., St. Paul

Tickets: \$59-\$11

Call: 651-291-1144

Capsule: A memorable Mendelssohn makes for a spirited season opener.