

NATHANIEL DETT CHORALE

Brainerd Blyden-Taylor, conductor

A Spirit of Unity Rendered in Song

Robert Harris, The Toronto Globe and Mail — Monday, June 11, 2001

An infectious spirit of joy, community and the sharing of song filled St. Andrew's Church as the Nathaniel Dett Chorale presented their last concert of their third season.

The Dett Chorale was founded three years ago to celebrate the work and spirit of one of black America's most distinguished musicians, R. Nathaniel Dett, who was actually Canadian, born on our side of Niagara Falls in 1882. And based on Friday's concert, the spirit of R. Nathaniel should be smiling: The chorale that bears his name gave us an evening of fine music, interesting programming and a strong sense of purpose and commitment.

Chorale conductor and founder Brainerd Blyden-Taylor presented a varied program, mixing a collection of spirituals, some composed and arranged by Dett himself, with a newly commissioned suite from Toronto jazzman Joe Sealy.

As well, the chorale gave us two fascinating American compositions, one a collection of American spirituals, and Baroque Swedish chorales interspersed with each other by Domenick Argento (it actually worked), and the other a suite by Indiana jazz professor David Baker. And although, as always, not all the pieces of the program were equally successful (I wouldn't care if I didn't hear the Baker again), the general level of musicianship and music-making was quite high.

The chorale is made up of professional singers, just-graduated voice students and other vocalists who blend their voices well, and who seem to share the same musical vision. Blyden-Taylor seemed to know exactly what he wanted from his group and led them successfully through repertoire that drew on classical music, jazz and the traditional spiritual. And it was in those spirituals, some traditional, some newly composed, that the chorale provided the evening's most moving moments. Dett's O Holy Lord and Adolphus Hailstork's Cloths of Heaven were simple, beautifully rendered spiritual messages in song, stunning in their frank juxtaposition of classical textures and jazzy harmonies, a perfect reflection of the history of a community in sound.

And community was the dominant theme of the evening. What an interesting audience filled the church - many of the same kinds of people you see at other choral events, but leavened with a wonderful multi-racial, multigenerational, cross-section of the Toronto public, greeting one another, moving to the same spiritual beat. I thought as I watched heads, young and old, black and white, coiffed and dreadlocked, all bobbing identically to the infectious rhythms of the Joe Sealy Quintet, how envious any of the city's classical outfits would be to have this audience at their concerts.