Britten’s Nativity setting spotlighted in Ferris Chorale’s first Christmas concert at Loyola
By Lawrence A. Johnson
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The Christmas concerts of the William Ferris Chorale remain a Chicago tradition for the choral music aficionado seeking something more challenging than Frosty the Snowman and Jingle Bells.

Oddly, Jingle Bells was actually on tap this season—albeit in a tautly contrapuntal modern arrangement—in a program that offered the ensemble’s characteristic mix of populist carols and more rigorously classical selections.

Saturday night’s concert at the Madonna della Strada Chapel marked the Ferris Chorale’s first Christmas event at its magnificent new home, having departed its longtime venue at Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Now serving as artist-in-residence of Loyola University, the Chorale’s current base is a majestic Art Deco church on Loyola’s lakefront campus.

The soaring space offers greater resonance than Mount Carmel, bestowing imposing bloom and amplitude to the choir’s 24 singers, although there was some tradeoff in clarity Saturday with words not always discernible.

Benjamin Britten was spotlighted in this year’s program, with the main work on this year’s program, his Op. 3, A Boy Was Born.

As indicated by the opus number, A Boy Was Born is an early work that gave Britten one of his first successes at age 19. The English composer’s mastery is already manifest here even before he was out of his teens, both in his discerning choice of texts—mostly anonymous 16th-century monastic writings—and his glove-like wedding of words to music in this large-scale choral theme and variations in six sections.

A Boy Was Born displays striking facility and ingenuity in Britten’s resourceful deployment of voices from the opening homophonic statement of the main theme to the rocking accompaniment of women’s voices in Lullay, Jesus where the text depicts Mary’s cradling of the infant Christ child. Also notable is the fast, vehement vocal writing for the depiction of Herod, the undulating counterpoint to The Three Kings and the segmented, ice-like writing for high voices of In the bleak mid-winter. The work culminates in a dizzyingly complex finale (Noel!), with densely layered eight-part writing achieving an almost symphonic grandeur.

Music director Paul French led the Ferris singers in a well prepared and committed account of this extraordinarily challenging music. At times, as in the quick contrapuntal thickets of the finale, the music became a bit of a blur, but the Chorale largely handled its intricacies with technical poise and polished dedication.

Of the rest of the program, most intriguing Saturday was Conrad Susa’s Three Mystical Carols. Written for choir and organ in 1969, the American composer’s music is largely tonal spiced by a mild astringent edge. The beautiful centerpiece, This Endrys Night, is especially inspired, and under French’s skillful direction the Ferris Singers gave a rich and expressive performance.
Of the selections in a Bells Medley, the Chorale members delivered a notably nimble and buoyant account of the Carol of the Bells and sheared the triteness off of Jingle Bells in an edgy, multi-layered arrangement.

Also notable was the glowing rendering of Victoria’s O Magnum Mysterium, Stephen Paulus’s lovely setting, A Savior from on High, and Steven Chatman’s strikingly fresh and imaginative arrangement of The First Noel, which also served as an encore.

Organist Thomas Weisflog lent worthy support in the Susa and showed off the floor-shaking power and bracing colors of the chapel’s Goulding and Wood instrument in Marcel Dupre’s Variations on Adeste Fideles.

These Christmas concerts mark the final appearances of tenor Jerry Jelsema, who is retiring after having sung with the Ferris Chorale for 21 of its 39 seasons.

The program will be repeated 3 p.m. Sunday Dec. 12 at Emmanuel Episcopal Church in La Grange. williamferrischorale.org; 773-508-2940.