William Ferris Chorale shines in Gailloreto premiere
By Michael Cameron
March 20, 2011

Choral groups must be sorely tempted to depend solely on existing repertoire for programming. Concert pianists, symphony orchestras and opera companies survive quite nicely without the risks, costs, and extended rehearsal requirements that are associated with new commissions. But the quest for new material is in the DNA of the William Ferris Chorale, the splendid vocal troupe whose recordings and concerts regularly treat its fans to newly created fare.

Saturday night the chorus continued this tradition with a thoroughly engrossing concert at the Madonna della Strada Chapel at Loyola University under the guidance of music director Paul French. Half of the program was an intriguing sampler of French music, while the other was dedicated to the premier of Jim Gailloreto’s Sea Songs, an engrossing celebration of all things aquatic. Scored for chorus, string quartet and soprano saxophone (played by the composer), it benefited from a fine first reading, and only steps from a churning Lake Michigan.

If the audience expected musical portraits of crashing waves, thunderous waterfalls, or gentle springs, they were instead greeted with something quite different. The composer rarely seemed interested in literal text painting, and sometimes treated the text counterintuitively. The four main movements were linked by four settings of Sea Shells (“She Sells Sea Shells by the Sea Shore”). The obvious tactic would be to exploit the rapid-fire tongue twister as a playful scherzo for the singers. Instead, the pace for all four was moderately slow, with deadpan multiple incantations of the eight words. The intent was to give similar weight to both the silly rhymes and the creations of legendary poets. In this context serious poetry became earthbound while the short ditty absorbed unexpected gravitas.

Languid Fingers is a setting of the e. e. cummings poem maggy and milly and molly and may. Each of the four girls is given music specific to her character and situation. Blues inflections peeked through occasionally in the chorus and more often in the soprano sax, which also soared with flights of improvisation. Again the composer choose restraint in his use of the Emily Dickinson poem Wild Nights!, underlining love’s intimacy and playing down the white hot passions that are also inherent in the text.

Water’s Music (text by Robert Creely) was scored without the strings, and unfolded with greater freedom in its harmonic vocabulary and use of dissonance, though examples of the latter were still relatively mild. Ebb & Flow (with a traditional English text redolent of the sea shanty) sported the most detailed scoring and contained the most shapely vocal lines and vivid climaxes.

French’s fully committed singers bore none of the usual signs of stress associated with premières, and the fine string players (violinists Katherine Hughes and Carol Kalvonjian, violist Chuck Bontrager and cellist Jill Kaeding) blended well with the other forces. The songs most vividly came to life when Gailloreto himself spun out languid phrases, adding doses of spontaneity and spark.
The chorale has always maintained a sensitive and idiomatic grasp of French music, and never have they sounded more authoritative than they did in this group of vocal gems by Daunais, Saint-Saëns, and Ravel. The latter’s Trois Chansons is one of his rare forays into the idiom, and rarer still in his use of his own text.

The exceedingly warm acoustic of the chapel is ideal for this ensemble, though one might expect diction to suffer from the lengthy reverberation. Not so on this occasion – the text came through with clarity and precision, yet never to the detriment of the gently sculpted phrases and finely spun lyrical threads. Karen Nussbaum, Sheetal Bhagat, Charles Cooney and Joe Labozetta were the distinguished soloists.

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