

Review: Willa Conrad, Chief Music Critic,
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Choirs up to a Mass Challenge

Schola Cantorum on Hudson is a bright spot in the generally meager landscape of classical offerings in the Jersey City-Hoboken area. The small choir, **founded by director Deborah Simpkin King** a decade ago, has an energy and level of technical preparation that only a few such nonprofessional groups in the state have. King must also have a good appetite for a challenge, because the preparation of the premiere performances of Montclair composer Randall Svane's *Mass* were likely intense and fraught with difficulty.

Saturday, the group, in conjunction with Lauda! Chamber Singers from South Jersey, gave the second performance of this beautifully sculpted, eight-part setting of the traditional ordinary of the Latin Mass at St. Matthew Trinity Lutheran Church in Hoboken. The singing was clear and self-assured, the direction by King consistent and exact, and the result a riveting reading of this gorgeous, eight-part a cappella score that uses Gregorian chant as a jumping-off point for lush, closely clustered vocal parts and pungent rhythms.

Svane's score excellently probes the most expressive use of each voice type, and expands on the extreme legato nature of traditional chant by adding biting, irregular rhythms and close, dissonant harmonies. The words are familiar, but the expression greatly expanded, though Svane retains certain traditional practices, like setting the Benedictus for solo quartet. Best of all, this is a concept and structure that does not fizzle out or lose its focus partway through. The work, though conceived first as a solo Kyrie movement, then gradually expanded to a full mass, has an integrity and thoroughness of development that marks the work of a mature and knowledgeable composer. One hopes these concerts of Svane's *Mass* help to get the work further performances; it deserves more exposure.