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Malamut closes first Newberry Consort season with a Praetorius epic

By Tim Sawyer

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Liza Malamut is taking the Newberry Consort places in her first year as artistic director. Literally and figuratively.

Saturday night's performance at St. Chrysostom's Episcopal Church in the Gold Coast saw another new venue this season for Chicago's most enduring early music ensemble. But the intelligence, ambition, and polish Malamut has brought to the organization are even more impressive and welcome than the changes of scenery.

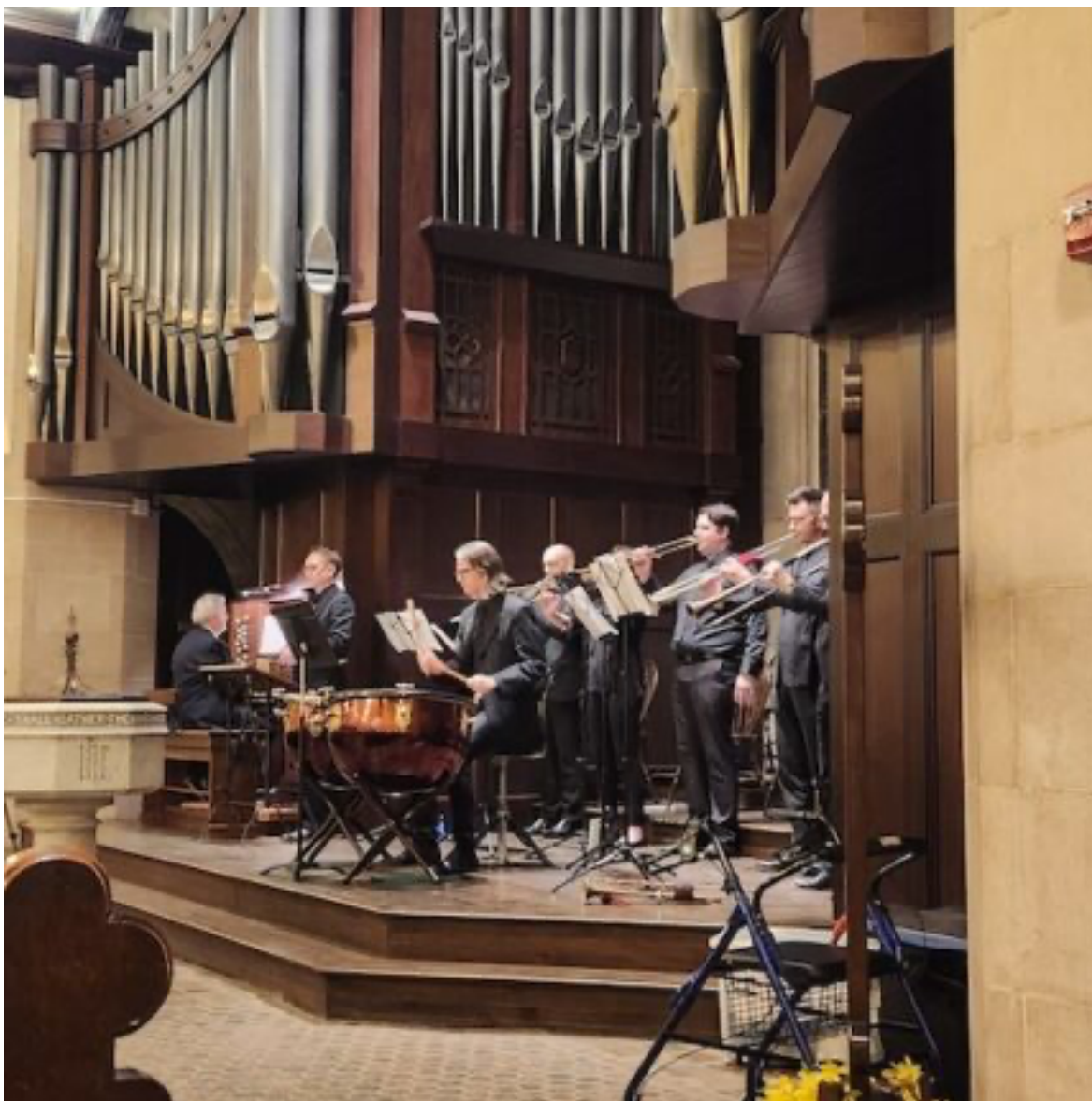
The program, "*Singen und Sagen: Music for Hope in a Time of War*" was Newberry's first collaboration with the

vocal consort Bella Voce, marking the close of the latter group's 40th anniversary season. Centered on Michael Praetorius' *Polyhymnia Caduceatrix et Panegyrica*, the evening was a moving statement of the persistence of both hope and art in the face of destruction.

The *Polyhymnia* was published on the eve of the Thirty Years' War, which would upend life on the European continent for three decades from the Defenestration of Prague in 1618 and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. On Saturday, Praetorius' music was punctuated with brief spoken excerpts of writing from the period that captured its uncertainty and desperation. These were thoughtfully selected, and could easily have been pleas from any of today's war-torn areas, establishing a palpable sense of continuity between past and present. The readings also honored the Lutheran conviction on the inseparability of words and music, hence the program's title, "to sing and to say," a liturgical instruction of Luther himself.

Praetorius' music, however, was the main event, and was realized in a dynamic and uplifting manner. Following a rousing organ prelude played by Richard Hoskins, the Newberry players and Bella Voce offered exquisite renderings of the *Polyhymnia*, a score which has been likened to the Lutheran version of the Monteverdi *Vespers* (as Malamut observed in her erudite program note).

Prepared by artistic director Andrew Lewis, the Bella Voce singers sang with superb intonation and balance, filling the intimate sanctuary with glowing polyphony. They performed in front of projected translations of the texts, which multimedia specialist Shawn Keener adorned with artwork from the period in another example of her consistently inspired work with the Consort.



For this event, Malamut vastly expanded Newberry's roster. The instrumental forces included a sackbut quartet (led by Malamut herself), a string consort (including Haymarket Opera founder Craig Trompeter), two cornetto specialists, three dulcian and recorder players, Brandan Acker on theorbo, as well as timpani and a quintet of trumpeters.

The instrumental playing was impeccable across the board, notably the nimble cornetto work of Alexandra Opsahl and Kiri Tollaksen in the "Wachet auf." Jeffery Grossman, artistic director of the New York Baroque ensemble the Sebastians, served as guest conductor, leading the substantial forces from the continuo organ. His leadership was subtle yet engaged, and he charted a sure course through Praetorius' highly intricate settings, particularly the extended and involved "Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ."

The five trumpeters were reserved until the final two numbers of the program, when the Consort members and Bella Voce singers fanned out to encircle the audience, and a gleaming Fantini fanfare sounded from the back of the sanctuary. This was followed by the best-known portion of the *Polyhymnia*, "In dulci jubilo," the familiar Christmas tune. Being immersed in the joyful swaying of Praetorius' valedictory lines was a stirring end to a stellar


evening, and left one eager to see what Malamut has in store for next season.

The program will be repeated 4 p.m. Sunday at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Evanston.

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