

Washington Chorus honors outgoing director with performance of his works

By Charles T. Downey February 27

Julian Wachner ends his nine-year tenure as director of the Washington Chorus at the end of this season. The ensemble marked his departure appropriately with one of his innovations, a New Music for a New Age concert, on Sunday evening at National Presbyterian Church. The musicians performed an awful lot of their leader's music with steadfast admiration.

Thomas Colohan, artistic director of the Washington Master Chorale, did the honors on the podium. Organized as a retrospective, the program was best with the most recent works, beginning with a tantalizing excerpt of Wachner's new opera, "Rev. 23," to be premiered in Boston this September. Soprano Colleen Daly was a confident, dramatic Persephone in the slow, minor-mode aria "Blood Rubies," about the pomegranate seeds that keep her soul in the underworld part of the year. It sounded the least like the work of another composer.

The large choir of about 200 singers stood in sections, which may have helped security on parts but led to shortcomings in blend and intonation. They had the loud exuberance of pieces such as "Arise, My Love" down, but some of the finer details were fuzzy, as in a set of Rilke animal songs. Organist Forrest Eimold responded ably to the many virtuosic demands of Wachner's writing, with other colors added by a small group of instrumentalists.

Wachner relies too much on homophonic textures when writing for chorus, with all parts singing in rhythmically aligned chords. It can be an effective way to draw attention to a text, but it gets dull quickly, just as it would in a work for orchestra or string quartet.

With time given over to Wachner's narration, some pieces should have been cut, beginning with "Blue Green Red," an overlong piece for trumpet and organ, and the youthful "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," with its melodic similarities to "Edelweiss."

