New York debut
Acadiana chorus shines at Carnegie Hall

They didn’t really expect a standing ovation. Not from a capacity crowd in one of the country’s best-known concert halls that has played host to everyone from world-class symphonies to some of the greatest rock ‘n’ roll acts of all time. But, when the more-than-200-voice combined chorus from Acadiana sang the last note of “Requiem of Psalms,” a week ago today, that’s exactly what they got. “It didn’t really hit me until I was off the stage,” said University of Louisiana music professor and the chorus’ conductor, James Haygood. “I thought, ‘They were standing up.’” The performance may have been a surprise for the audience, as well. “They were astounded,” said Tolley Odom, who was at Carnegie Hall with her husband, Jim, who was on stage. “There was a quiet before they clapped at the end. They were sort of mesmerized.” It was not a routine reaction from a tough New York crowd, Haygood added. “New York audiences are typically reserved — if it’s not worthy, it’s not an automatic thing to bestow.”

The piece, written by Episcopal School of Acadiana teacher and Chorale Acadiane member Paul Baker, was performed in New York by the combined voices of Chorale Acadiane, the University of Louisiana Chorale, the University of Louisiana Children’s Chorus, Asbury Methodist Church Choir, St. Pius X Catholic Church Choir; Episcopal Church of the Ascension Choir and Abbeville’s St. Mary Magdelen Church Choir.

There was good reason for the crowd’s reaction, Odom said. “They just... I don’t want to say they nailed it, but they did. It was just perfection.” The saga began about a year and a half ago, when Haygood was approached by Peter Tiboris of Mid-America Productions, a company that books groups for Carnegie Hall, to bring a group to New York. Tiboris recently began inviting choral groups from...
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around the country to perform at the prestigious venue. “I was a little unsure if I wanted to do it,” Haygood said, “but when I started working on Paul Baker’s piece, they called me again, and I said, ‘We’ll come up if I can do this piece.’”

The Louisiana group shared the bill with two other choruses with singers from around the country.

“We spoke to people who came for the concert from Lafayette who had attended all three presentations. They said our performance was the best,” said Chorale Acadienne member Patsy Bienvenu, who is also singer for the jazz group, AMeltingPot and a retired nurse. “They may be a little prejudiced, but...hey....” she added, laughing.

Performing in Carnegie Hall was exciting for her, Bienvenu said. “It doesn’t look like much from the outside, but when you walk in, you walk into history steeped in music.

“It was awesome. The sound was great. You felt nervous, for one thing and you wanted to do so well, because it’s such a beautiful piece of music. It was something no one else had heard, except us in Louisiana and we wanted to make sure everyone who heard it was impressed by it.”

If the adults were nervous, the children were a different story.

“This was the thrill of a lifetime for them,” said UL Children’s Chorus director Norma Jean Luckey, also a teacher and singer with the Bob Luckey Jazz Combo. “One of the amazing things was they weren’t nervous on-stage. They felt they knew the music and they were exhilarated.”

The success of the piece owes in part to the hall itself, said Chorale Acadienne soprano Sylvia Turner. “The hall is beautiful and acoustically unmatched. It can’t help but be good.”

Amid all the excitement for the performers, there was only one low note, Turner said. “It was obvious Jim (Haygood) had a rapport with them.”

Haygood was pleased with the ensemble. “In all modesty, if there were people there from Acadia, they would have been proud of us.”

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