

POINTS NORTH

Handbell ensemble rings true

By Steve Aggergaard
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At times, watching the Strikepoint Handbell Ensemble Wednesday night was sort of like viewing a famous and truly hilarious "I Love Lucy" episode.

Remember the one at the candy factory? Lucy and Ethel get jobs making chocolates and can't keep up on the assembly line, so they flail their arms every which way while stuffing candy in their mouths and down their dresses to cover up the evidence.

Just as that show succeeded in humor, the Duluth-based handbell ensemble succeeded in athleticism and showmanship, not to mention musicality.

Athleticism would be expected among the ringers. So would some fast-moving arms. But a shared understanding of baroque style? Phrasing? Drama? It happened. Wow.

The 10-member bell ensemble, which is from First United Methodist Church in Duluth, performed two pieces tailored for the ringers and the Lake Superior

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Chamber Orchestra.

The first was a Handel organ concerto transcribed for bells by conductor Warren Friesen. The ringing was unmistakably baroque and unflinchingly accurate.

Most impressive was the bell ensemble's phrasing. On faster passages the ringers stressed the right notes while backing off just a touch on the less-important ones, much as a good harpist-chordist might do.

Also performed was a concerto for handbells composed by LSCO member Bradley Bombardier. The piece itself was as impressive as its performance, with percussion used creatively and other instruments toned down but not tuned out.

The ringers displayed the many sounds handbells can make — from joyous rings to stomach-punch thuds. The piece's climax came when the players on stage were joined by a dozen or so in the audience who stood and rang their hearts out, too.

The night's other works were much more forgettable. The best of the rest — "Serenata Notturna," a Mozart work for strings only — featured a quartet playing with the rest of the LSCO. Balance, phrasing and tuning all were very good.

Other works included "Spirituals for Strings" by 20th century composer Morton Gould, variations of a Charles Ives organ work modified and jazzed up by Bombardier, and a short work for eight woodwinds by Beethoven.

Tuning was a problem at times on the more "modern" works. So were some of the ensembles, with a few players being tentative and a few others coming in just a touch early.

The Lake Superior Chamber Orchestra's mission clearly is to break some musical stereotypes. That, admirably, allows groups like Strikepoint to perform.

But Wednesday night the violinists, cellists, horn players and more traditional chamber orchestra players seemed more comfortable with old standards and old forms.