

Chicago Tribune Review of "Praise"

Praise' is too good to be silent so long

For much of his [career](#), Ralph Shapey found the [University](#) of Chicago to be a nurturing haven.

When he joined its faculty in 1964 -- lured away from his beloved New York -- it backed the formation of the Contemporary Chamber Players, a group that, under Shapey's guidance, quickly emerged as the most open-minded advocate of new [music](#) in the Midwest.

When, between '69 and '76, he imposed a moratorium on the [performance](#) of his compositions in protest against the music establishment's shabby [treatment](#) of mavericks like himself, the school stood by him. In the mid-'80s, after receiving a MacArthur "genius" grant, Shapey toyed with the idea of returning to the East Coast, but in the end he realized where his home was -- and where his singular voice was encouraged.

Though [retired](#) for nearly a decade and in frail health, Shapey has continued to write while maintaining ties to the university. Last Saturday the CCP (and the U. of C.) honored his 80th birthday with a revival of his hourlong oratorio "Praise" in Rockefeller Chapel.

The choice of "Praise" was deliberate, as fellow composer (and protege) Shulamit Ran reminded the audience. Its premiere in 1976, with the CCP led by him and also in Rockefeller Chapel, ended his "silence." Scored for bass-baritone, double chorus and chamber orchestra, this massive, sprawling "testament to God" had been presented only in sections since, so daunting are its size and technical demands. This performance, directed by Carmen Helena Tellez and featuring bass-baritone Howard Swyers and the assembled forces of CCP, Pacifica Quartet and Indiana University's Contemporary Vocal Ensemble, was its second ever.

Characteristic of the best of Shapey's choral music, "Praise" is rugged, fervent, clamorous and even medieval in feel. The oratorio's 10 sections are divided into halves, each starting with rage, defiance and restlessness, then segueing into the celebrant exhorting the chorus out of wilderness (done theatrically here, as a slow procession from the back of the chapel to the chancel). The repetition of the first three sections might seem redundant but sounded urgent in the ardent and nuanced reading by Swyers and the mixed choir.

Each half then works up through a protracted series of clashes between sonic blocks and choral counterpoints to a searing climax followed by resolution and exultation. The "Hallelujah" finale, rowdy like a mass rally, is a triumphant proclamation of faith. Tellez and [company](#) brought all this to vivid life. Let's not wait another 26 years for the next performance.