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Music

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Concert Review: Swingle Singers' lovely sound still intact

Web Posted: 02/09/2005 12:00 AM CST

Mike Greenberg
Express-News Senior Critic

The last time the Swingle Singers were in town — for a 1979 performance of Luciano Berio's Sinfonia with the San Antonio Symphony under Francois Huybrechts — none of the eight current members was long out of (or maybe yet into) swaddling clothes.

The Swingle DNA was still very much in evidence, however, in the troupe's return, Monday night in the recital hall of the UTSA suburban campus. The singers also are booked to perform at the Texas Music Educators Association convention.

Long based in England, the Swingle Singers was formed on a lark in 1962 by freelance session singers in Paris. Thee troupe gained huge success in the U.S. with its first recording, "Bach's Greatest Hits," a collection of keyboard music in founder Ward Swingle's jazzy doo-wah vocal arrangements — with string bass and drumset also emulated by voice. Eventually, the troupe got around to singing actual words, but nearly always with the trademark "instrumental" accompaniments.

With Swingle in semiretirement, the current artistic director is tenor Tom Bullard, who joined the group in 2001, fresh out of King's College, Cambridge. The senior member, bass (and uncannily convincing drum set) Jeremy Sadler has been with the group since 1998.

Monday's concert included several of Swingle's old arrangements, which still sounded fresh and wonderful — among them, the Bach Fugue in G Minor and "Badinerie," and Stephen Sondheim's "Send In the Clowns," with beautiful "chime" arpeggios under the lyrics. Swingle's harmonies were gorgeously iridescent in Michel Legrand's "Summer of '42," and dense but tautly controlled in Hammerstein and Kern's lovely "All the Things You Are."

There were many other wonders. In an arrangement by J. Forbes, Chopin's sad Etude in E Minor took on a somewhat Brazilian rhythmic lilt. A quick, jazzed-up section made the return to Chopin's original for the last few measures doubly poignant.

Bullard's contributions included a superb arrangement of "Pretty Lady," from Sondheim's "Pacific Overtures."

Showmanship brightened the concert without seeming obtrusive. The troupe danced a quite decent twist while singing Quincy Jones' "Soul Bossa Nova," arranged by B. Parry.

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Lennon-McCartney "Because/You Never Give Me Your Money" and "Blackbird/I Will" and Procul Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale," whose lyrics made, um, just as much sense on Monday as they did in 1967.

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