

## SWEET TEA



# Music good enough to dress up for

To say I am not a necktie kind of a guy is like saying Huck Finn was not a soap-and-water kind of a fellow.

Which is what makes this remarkable: Thursday night, I wished I was wearing a tie.

We were seated, my wife and I, at the Stella Boyle Smith Concert Hall. It's in the Fine Arts building at Uler (ain't that how y'all say UALR?). We were attending a performance of *Messiah* presented by Uler and Second Presbyterian Church.

Bevan Keating, a Canadian who is director of choral activities at the university, was conducting a chorus of 110

singers whose ages ranged from late teens to mid-70s. The chamber orchestra included violinist Kiril Laskarov, co-concertmaster of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra.

The four soloists, selected from 26 students who auditioned, were Shaina Erwin, an Arkansan; Hwa Soon (Fascha) Patrick; Jinho Park, a Korean; and Matthew Tatus, also an Arkansan.

The harpsichordist was Kristina Marinova-Pavlov, a Bulgarian who is the accompanist for the Uler Concert Choir, Community Chorus and Opera Theatre.

The setting was intimate, which is a high-church way to say that the lower level of the concert hall is so small that we were practically sitting in the orchestra's lap, and the chorus was so close you could count eyelashes four rows back.

The instruments, with the harpsichord behind everything was — well, for lack of a sophisticated musical vocabulary — sublime. The singing — well — chill bumps.

I looked from face to face to face, from violinist to flautist to soloist to back-row singers, and the singers, nearly every one of them, sang as if each sang solo, as if every note

each sang was the only note we would hear. They sang with an intensity. With conviction. Their faces made me believe that they believed the words they sang.

The energy of youth. The maturity of age. And a love for the music.

With their hearts, they elevated this beyond performance.

Each responsible, as Mr. Keating says, to sing with love and passion. "Don't put the score in front of your face," he says he tells them. "Instead of holding back, put the score down — you know the score — and sing."

After Thursday's performance, Mr. Tatus thanked the conductor and his fellow musicians, thanked them for "making the *Messiah* about the text, about what *Messiah* is."

"He felt we transcended the notes, the orchestra — we got past all that," Mr. Keating says. "I heard that from a few people. You can't rehearse that. You can't perform that, you have to have a very honest giving of the singer."

And so I sat amidst that beauty, there in my best black jeans and a plaid shirt, looking very informal, and I watched

nearly 120 people giving us that beauty, and the thought occurred to me. I should have dressed up for this moment, out of respect for the musicians, out of respect for their work and their passion, out of respect for the music and the composer.

"I felt something was singing to us," Mr. Keating says. "Handel spoke to many of us [Thursday] night across the centuries."

*The group will give a second performance of Messiah tonight at 7 at Second Presbyterian Church. Admission is free, and the church will accept a free-will offering.*