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The hits are on the radio, but not with that Cantus sound

By Rob Hubbard
Special to the Pioneer Press

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Can choral nerds rock?

That's the question you may ask if attending the latest collection of "covers" concerts from the male chorus Cantus. This Twin Cities-based group — born in the vocal-music crucible of Northfield's St. Olaf College — can safely call itself among America's elite classical male vocal groups. But what happens when they decide to set aside the Renaissance polyphony and rock out?

They did it to end their season last year, and it proved so successful they decided to work up some new arrangements of songs most often found on rock radio ... with an occasional oldies-station standard thrown in. On Friday night, the nine men of Cantus opened a five-night run at Northeast Minneapolis' Ritz Theater with a fun and free-spirited evening that was most compelling when the backing band sat out and the singers' tight-knit harmonies stood alone.

But that's not to say there wasn't some wonderfully inventive instrumentation backing Cantus' strong voices. Six of the nine members of the group contributed arrangements to this 18-song show, and some of them let the musicians outshine the singers.

For example, Gary Ruschman (who manned the bass

guitar when he wasn't singing lead) fashioned a cool jazz take on "Baby, Now That I've Found You" by British invasion soulsters the Foundations, allowing Dave Hagedorn and Lee Blaske to swing on the vibes and electric piano, respectively. And Timothy Takach transformed Ben Harper's "Better Way" into something George Harrison might have brought to a Beatles session. It floated ethereally on the sitar of Mark Ilaug and the tablas of Rikki Davenport.

But this group's greatest strengths are its voices, as evidenced by a hypnotic a cappella tandem of Brandi Carlile's "Shadow on the Wall" and Sweet Honey in the Rock's "Wanting Memories." And, while the Four Seasons' "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You" and Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" may have been crowd-pleasers, they weren't as intriguing as the group's interpretations of Fleet Foxes' "White Winter Hymnal" or Bjork's "Unravel."

So these choral nerds can rock when they want to, but creating vocal magic is their strong suit.

Rob Hubbard can be reached at
rhubbard@pioneerpress.com.

What: Cantus' "Covers II"

When: 7:30 p.m. today, Friday and next Saturday; 7 p.m. June 14

Where: Ritz Theater, 345 13th Ave. N.E., Minneapolis

Tickets: \$27.50-\$10, available at 612-436-1129 or communitytix.com

Capsule: Some strong songs find sweet harmony.

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