

Chamber Choir Joins Earplay At Cowell

By Joshua Kosman
Chronicle Staff Critic

The new-music group Earplay was joined by the San Francisco Chamber Singers for its Monday night concert in the Cowell Theatre. Three of the six pieces on the short program featured the chorus, and even when the music was less than inspiring, the 20-member group, directed by Robert Geary, produced a confident, well-tuned blend of voices.

Among the choral pieces was Alexander Post's "This is the Garden," a setting of an e.e. cummings poem that received its first performance. Though not especially adventurous, the music treats its text with tactful appeal, tending toward slow, moody rhythms and gently dissonant harmonies. The effect is to let the words come through, without needless fiddling or underlining.

There was a sensitive performance by the chorus, accompanied by Janet Kutulas (flute), Peter Josheff (clarinet), George Thomson (viola), Karen Gottlieb (harp) and Scott Bleaken (percussion). "Late Year Music," a sparse, impressionistic piece by Mark Winges for the same performers, made some fetching points but seemed to get caught up in special effects (whistling, whispers, and so on) at the expense of the music.

Another premiere, Beth Wiemann's "Villancico," proved an engaging affair. Scored for flute, clarinet, viola and cello (the reliable Sarah Freiberg), the piece offers a set of variations on a 15th century Spanish song; the treatment is thorough but never arcane, and the rhythmic writing lively. Later, the piece introduces an instrumental chorale — a little out of nowhere, I thought, but to charming effect. The performance was handsomely controlled.

Josheff gave a spirited account of Anthony Korf's "Three Movements for Clarinet Solo," a quirky, pungent and occasionally witty set of short etudes. The first piece, an assemblage of snaky curves entitled "Don't be ridiculous!" was the most overtly entertaining, but the slow central "Meditation" included some winningly lyrical writing.

Donal Michalsky's 1956 "Fantasia" for chorus and bass clarinet — a sweet, rather watery setting of four poems by Federico Garcia Lorca, opened the concert. Thomson also performed a five-minute solo piece, "Music for Viola" by Lori Dobbins.