

Midwest group versatile, powerful, fun
A CAPPELLA FESTIVELLA: Tonic Sol-fa
sends audience rushing to CD line.

By Lora Mahaffey

The 11th annual A cappella Festivella filled the University of Alaska Anchorage's Williamson Auditorium with a mighty roar on Saturday night. If the first half of the evening was sometimes a bit flat and on occasion completely out of harmony, it was mighty loud nonetheless.

Batteries Not Included, a local a cappella trio who opened the show, sang a version of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," a standard for them, and their old "Island Earth" was dragged out and dusted off for the evening. They did manage to stay in tune for the most part, but the two-note buzzing soprano was a bit like a mosquito hovering around one's head.

Fermata Nowhere, an award-winning all-male a cappella group from Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, Calif., was next and, for the most part, a lot of fun. The "Chili's Babyback Ribs" medley was amusing, and their classical performance of "Ave Maria" was truly lovely. This group won second place at the 2004 International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella in New York City, and that showed in their innovative, relaxed and playful style of singing.

They do well as a large group of singers, but there was a bit too much improvising that made for some sloppy, loose timing. Overall, the audience, especially college-age girls, enjoyed the performance and the group seemed to enjoy being there.

The second part of the evening was a delightful surprise. Tonic Sol-fa, a quintet out of the Midwest, was tonic on my ears.

The clear, vibrant harmonies, beautiful voices and tight rhythm made for effortless listening. This is group you can sit back and enjoy the ride with.

They showed their versatility with a lighthearted version of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" done in the voices of the Muppets, and a strong gospel song called "The Long Black Train," which was powerful and moving. "Oklahoma Wind," an original composition written by Shaun Johnson, the group's -main soloist, was melodious and well crafted. A rocking version of Elvis Presley's "Satisfy Me" had everyone clapping.

Nine years of singing together have produced an instinctual execution of seamless musical lines, as well as a great rapport with the audience and a sense of fun. I enjoyed their joking with one another almost as much as listening to those wonderful voices.

There is nothing like a live performance, but I would have bought Tonic Sol-fa's CD at the end of the show if there hadn't been such a huge line of people thinking the same thing. Well done, guys.

Lora Mahaffey lives in Anchorage.