

World premiere rocks Centennial

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For 100 years, the August Handel Oratorio Society has been presenting "Messiah" at Christmastime or Eastertime, and in more recent years, works by Beethoven, Verdi and Mendelssohn in mid-spring.

Even in the last decade, the introduction of choral works by Poulenc and Stravinsky didn't seem too sensational for the rather proper audience attracted to Augustana Centennial Hall in Rock Island.

But this weekend, a new work commissioned by the society to commemorate its centennial celebration left some in the audience a bit stunned, if not a little bewildered.

CHARLES WUORINEN'S "The Celestial Sphere" last night had its world premiere.

It is a monumental composition, calling for an extremely expanded percussion section, full symphony orchestra, and, of course, the Handel Society's nearly 300-voice chorus, including the 70-member Augustana Choir.

Choral, "Celestial Sphere" may be termed, but it actually is more of a symphony in four movements with choral obligato. Perhaps, a more apt appellation might be "Concerto for Percussion With Encounters of a Vocal Kind."

First, I happen to like this work immensely. And, I admire conductor Don Morrison and Augustana Symphony conductor Dan Culver for their dedication to present an outstanding performance of a new work of such vast dimensions and technical complexities generally beyond the capabilities of student-community performance standards.

UNDOUBTEDLY, "Celestial Sphere" is the most modern and atonal major composition ever performed by this centenarian society. But, much in music has changed since Handel composed "Messiah" and Wuorinen conceived this brilliant avante garde four-part choral rhapsody that definitely shows the influence on the American-born composer by Stravinsky, Penderecki, Messiaen, Scriabin, Varese and Leonard Bernstein. Not bad company, really!

However, if you happen to like Handel, you just might not like Wuorinen. He has a genius for ear-splitting gigantic chords and climaxes, like at the end of the "Second Symphony About the Empyrean," which opens the final movement.

And, in that same movement comes perhaps Wuorinen's most inventive, most inspired intonations — a forte vocal "Reveal, ye glorious spirits, when ye knew the way the Son of God took to renew lost man," accompanied by an outburst of xylophone. Absolutely devastating listening!

THERE IS A decided Oriental shading in "Celestial Sphere," especially in the closing orchestration of the first movement. Then, there's an exotic sensation in the opening of Part Two, "Symphony About the Holy Ghost," a prerecorded tape that pro-

duces sounds like a Mozart concerto for glass harmonica.

After all the pyrotechnics, mostly in the percussion, with a few choral fortissimos, "Celestial Sphere" ends with a rather pianissimo Hallelujah!

The sudden serenity seemed to stun the audience. And, some left Centennial Hall feeling "Celestial Sphere" may be more profane than sacred.

Nonetheless, April 25, 1981 may be one of the more important dates in the Quad-City chronicles of musical enlightenment.

More noted musical authorities will have a chance to judge the merits of Wuorinen's nine months of creativity next summer when National Public Broadcasting will air nation-wide last night's recorded performance in Augustana's Centennial Hall.