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## Wartburg Choir, a Mighty Fortress of Skill

Wednesday, March 3, 2004; Page C04

Together with the acclaimed bass-baritone Simon Estes, the Wartburg College Choir gave an enthralling concert Monday night at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall. The school -- in Waverly, Iowa -- is named after the legendary Wartburg Castle in eastern Germany, a fortress perched on a precipice looming over Eisenach, where Bach was born and Luther was housed when he translated the New Testament. The Wartburg College Choir continues much of that German Lutheran tradition today -- a chorus trained with rock-solid discipline and convinced that communal singing sometimes says more than "ordinary" speech.

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Estes, veteran star of opera houses around the globe, still captivates with his fabled majestic stage presence. Now a professor and artist-in-residence at Wartburg, he was a commanding figure Monday in Verdi arias, songs by Copland and Vaughan Williams, and spirituals. Despite the decades, Estes' voice has lost none of its vigor, focus or brilliantly burnished sonority. And his pianissimo is worth a million bucks. Admirably responsive to its conductor, Paul A. Torkelson, the choir has impeccable intonation and excellent diction apart from its slurred (very American) R's. Together with Estes and separately, the singers were at home in many styles, capturing the fresh-air ambiance of a chorus from Copland's "Tender Land" as beautifully as they did the gospel tone of "Music Down in My Soul."

Pianist Suzanne Torkelson was a fully supportive accompanist along with students Angela Kohlhaas and Elizabeth Carr.

-- Cecelia Porter

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