

BLEMF CONCERT REVIEW: VOCO

# Moira Smiley, VOCO present balanced program

**By Peter Jacobi**

H-T Reviewer

Variety continues to be a strength of the Bloomington Early Music Festival, which on Sunday evening presented "Circle, Square, Diamond and Flag," a program of old and experimental folk hymns and more, sung by Moira Smiley and three women colleagues calling themselves VOCO.

Smiley is a familiar talent, having performed on a number of occasions around here while studying at IU's Jacobs School. Her return brought a large and enthusiastic crowd to the Unitarian Universalist Church.

Smiley's singular capabilities at composing, arranging and singing were clearly in evidence, more so even than remembered. She now also has at her disposal three persuasive musicians, all of whom make their home, as she does, in the Los Angeles area. From what one heard on Sunday, they work together seamlessly. Word is that the group put the program together in three weeks. In so short a period of time, all the music — two dozen items — had been prepared to near perfection and, not only that, memorized.

Smiley's passion has been shape-note singing, a method of notating and performing music used prominently in 18th and 19th century rural America, early on in New England, later in the South. The repertoire on Sunday included period church songs as well as traditionals from Appalachia and songs of her own making. Some featured warbles

and wails, of the most soothing kind, blended in magically subtle fashion. Others proved raucous and raw and yet, in surprising and sudden shifts, introduced a here-and-there exotic embellishment.

Throughout, the coalescing of harmonies and contrapuntal parts was remarkable, ever true to pitch. A cappella songs alternated with those accompanied by cello or banjo. Sacred items were balanced against secular expressions of everyday life. Old hymns, a batch with text by Isaac Watts, unfolded next to imaginative experimental contemporary expositions by Smiley herself. A couple of body percussion pieces came along, too, these comprised of rhythmic slaps, claps and stomps. And near the end, Bloomington performer/composer Malcolm Dalglish joined the women on stage for a sweet run-through of his rousing "Streams of Living."

Musically, the concert was nothing but praiseworthy. There were problems, however. One, the venue: though the Unitarian Universalist Church is ideal for musical events of various sorts and shapes, VOCO might have benefited from an even more intimate space, where items chosen for being understated and fine spun had a better chance to shine. Two, the spoken matter: Smiley and company, like so many of their musical brethren, talked from the stage far less amply than they sang and played; they needed either elocution lessons or a microphone.