

Concert review (Boston Early Music News, Volume XVII, No.3)

Blue Heron Renaissance Choir; Scott Metcalfe, director

John Taverner, *Missa Mater Christi* with Sarum chant & antiphons by Aston and Sheppard.

October 17, 1999, Church of the Advent, Boston.

You know the old cliché "too much of a good thing?" Well, it may apply to chocolate mousse, leftover Halloween candy and the number of Democrats in the Massachusetts State House, but it certainly doesn't apply to good Renaissance choirs. While Boston is not quite England where a Renaissance choir stands at every street-corner, we do have our fair share: Schola Cantorum, Capella Alamire, Convivium Musicum, The Church of the Advent Choir, Boston Camerata (at times), to name a few.

Add to that list another good thing: **Blue Heron.**

Founded by Boston early-music omnipresence **Scott Metcalfe** (director of Convivium Musicum and the Cambridge Bach Ensemble, member of The King's Noyse and La Luna), Blue Heron is a sort of "Boston Renaissance All-Stars." Several of the eleven singers are or were members of more than one of the aforementioned local Renaissance choirs, as well as nationally known ensembles Schola Discantus and Chanticleer. This is no amateur pick-up group.

Presenting a mass in a truly HIP format - not just in performance style but also "in context" with the chants and antiphons - is a hit or miss endeavor. While an increasing number of ensembles are releasing CDs in this manner, in live settings this risks being on the long-and-dry side. Are we at a concert, or at Sunday mass? Should we applaud or kneel down between numbers?

But whereas the numerous and sometimes lengthy plainchant propers are often a liability in a concert setting, in Blue Heron's case they were worth the price of admission alone! Quite simply, I have not heard better chant singing from any choir, anywhere, in recent memory. The men of the choir were spot on together, and the Sarum chant was resonant, flowing, and sung with great musicality; all the while retaining the feeling that the chant was driven by the words (as it should be). Metcalfe's conducting of the chants may not be HIP, but it was restrained enough so that it never interfered; visually or otherwise.

Aside from the wonderful Sarum chant, the other show-stealer was *Ave Maria dive matris Anne* by Hugh Aston, about whom almost nothing is known. While "just" used as a votive antiphon (which it is) in this setting, in another concert it could very well be the centerpiece of an entire program. A huge work with long melismas and complex counterpoint, it rivals anything by Sheppard or White in its scope and sonorities. It was sung here with fluidity and ease, and just enough dynamic diversity to provide shape to such a large work. Special kudos to musicologist Nick Sandon, who reconstructed the missing tenor part to both this and the Taverner mass.

Taverner's *Missa Mater Christi* is a large-scale parody mass based on his own antiphon *Mater Christi*. Like so many English composers Taverner was enamored with cross-relations, which surface throughout the work -- at times in places you don't expect. These dissonances provide wonderful contrast to the otherwise rich & consonant harmonies of the work, and sometimes I think the singers could have "sat" into the dissonances just a tad more. Then again, my wife scolds me for putting cayenne pepper on just about everything.

Throughout the evening the intonation and overall balance were impeccable. The sopranos provided that English boys-choir tone without every sounding harsh or strained, and the tenors were resonant in all registers. Basses Glenn **Billingsley** and Paul **Guttry** were...well, what can you say? You couldn't ask for a better bass section than these two.

The only minor flaw was that the male alto consistently overshadowed the female alto throughout, and their tones didn't blend together as one. However, this a common problem in choirs with mixed-gender alto sections, and the fact that I even point it out is a testament to just how good Blue Heron is...

And like I said: Blue Heron *is* good. If you missed their debut concerts in October, be sure to catch them next time.

Lansing McLoskey