

SCHOLA CANTORUM, concert review (Boston Early Music News, Volume XIV, No.3)
10/4/96, Church of the Advent
10/5/96, Harvard-Epworth Church

Close your eyes, if you will, and recall what the early music bin at your local record store looked like 14 years ago. Assuming your store even had one - a dubious assumption to begin with - it probably looked like this: a couple of stacks of records (yes, LP's!) and a few CD's, consisting primarily of some of Her Majesty's musically eccentric subjects such as David Munrow, The Clerkes of Oxenford, Pro Cantione Antiqua, The Consort of Musicke, The Taverner Choir, and of course The Hilliard Boys. Throw in a couple of records by The Deller Consort and a handful of poorly recorded Gregorian chant collections, and there you had it. What was the common thread besides their passports? A strong emphasis on Renaissance sacred vocal music.

Sure, the early music section has ballooned in size in recent years, but a good 80% of it is shared by Baroque and "wild-about-chant" CD's, with the medieval and Renaissance eras squeezed in the middle like two Sumo wrestlers trying to share a pup-tent. And on display at the top of the rack: The Boston Camerata's recordings of American hymns and Roger Norrington's Brahms!?

While the newfound popularity and increased diversity of early music are not to be dismissed, Fredrick Jodry would like to remind us of two things: 1) There is still a vast amount of Renaissance vocal music to explore, and 2) they don't call it "the Golden Age of Vocal Music" for nothin'. Together with his 14 voice - and now 14 year old - Schola Cantorum he makes his case so eloquently and convincingly that it is impossible to remain an unbeliever. At their two concerts this month they made yet another point crystal clear: You don't have to *be* a Brit to *sing* a Brit with conviction.

Anyone who has heard Robert White's (c.1535 - 1574) *Christe qui lux es* will know that he is without a doubt one of the most talented and underrated composers of the entire Tudor period. This fact was confirmed by the stunning work which started the program, *Porcio mea, Domine*. It is a masterpiece of unfolding, imitative polyphony, and the final "Amen" could be used as a textbook for repeated cross relations and ear-twisting dissonances.

After a shaky start where part of the choir was confused as to how to pronounce *porcio* (hint: it is a misspelling of *portio*, and thus should not be pronounced "por-chee-o;" in any case, better to have everyone pronounce it the same way!), it was upwards - both figuratively and literally - from there.

As in much of this repertoire, the tessitura for the sopranos in *Porcio mea* is not only incredibly high, but persistently so. Dozens of high f's and g's permeate the work, many of them sustained for what seems like an eternity. The task was handled exquisitely and apparently effortlessly by the soprano section, who not only blended as one voice but managed to remain musically sensitive and actually enunciate text while soaring in the stratospheres.

The blend, balance and general tone production were impeccable, with no help from the bone dry acoustics of Harvard-Epworth Church. Occasionally - as in a few other spots in the concert - we could have used more volume and commitment from the basses (perhaps Mr. Jodry was a bit under the spell of the treble-heavy English choral tradition), but it was never to the point of distraction.

Much to his credit, Mr. Jodry did not succumb to the temptation of puffing up the program with warhorses by Byrd or Tallis. William Mundy (another underperformed Tudor composer) was represented, and the works by Taverner and Tallis were well chosen gems; a highlight being Taverner's brief but inspired and sublime *Quemadmodum*.

One genre of music that is experiencing a renaissance of its own in the early music scene is, ironically, 20th century music. The Hilliards, Ars Nova, Theatre of Voices, Ensemble PAN, Tapestry, Chapelle Royale, and even Anonymous 4 have all championed contemporary music in recent years. There is, of

course, one catch: they only choose music from the “Neo-gothic-minimalist” movement, i.e. John Tavener, Gorecki, Arvo Pärt, Einhorn, etc. The sole exception is Bo Holten’s *Ars Nova* and new ensemble *Musica Ficta*, who “dare” to place Cage and Ligeti side by side with Josquin and Palestrina.

Not to be left out, Schola Cantorum filled out this program with no less than two premieres by local composer Patricia Van Ness (b.1951). A violinist by training, Ms. Van Ness didn’t start composing until relatively late, and then primarily for orchestra and instrumental ensembles. It is difficult to believe that she has no personal experience singing in early music choirs, as her vocal writing is extremely idiomatic and shows an intimate understanding of how singers think and use their instruments. Perhaps this is partially due to the fact that she “caught the early music bug” in 1990, and since March has been the Composer-in-Residence at 1st Church Congregational in Cambridge; a position much coveted by many a local composer. (Unfortunately, nobody in the audience was privy to this information, as for some bizarre reason there were no program notes; a definite *faux pas* at an early music concert where the audience is interested in historical context and sordid trivia.)

The first work, *Cor mei cordis* (‘94), is a large scale cantus firmus motet based on a chant of her own composition, and the second piece - *Requies aeterna donata est* - is hot off the press for the Feast of All Saints Day. Schola Cantorum not only felt completely at home in this music, but they visibly *enjoyed* it. Clearly Mr. Jodry and the ensemble did not approach this as “dreaded modern music,” but just as they would a work by any Renaissance master.

Of course it doesn’t hurt that as Tavener/Gorecki/Pärt, Van Ness composes in an entirely consonant - if not downright tonal - idiom, rarely challenging either singer or listener with overt dissonance, complex rhythms, extended vocal techniques or leaping melodic lines. Indeed, more dissonance was to be found in White’s *Porcio mea, Domine* from 400+ years earlier! That said, in contrast to most of the Neo-gothic gang these works were not content with static minimalism; rather, they were filled with rich sonorities, interesting harmonic progressions and emotional contrasts. As a rule Van Ness writes her own texts and has them translated into Latin. Though intended for liturgical use, these texts are ripe with quasi-Hildegard mysticism and ambiguously beautiful symbolisms, and stand alone as works of poetry.

The one consistent drawback was the tuning with the cello and organ “obligato.” The choir’s intonation throughout the concert was otherwise flawless, but for some reason they simply could not stay in tune with the cello. Which brings up the question: “Why the obligato in the first place?” Most often it was doubling the bass part, so could have been omitted (as the organ was on 10/5). If added to give some bottom to the piece, this could have been accomplished by simply having the basses sing louder. Perhaps the intent was to provide some timbral color, but the overall effect was distracting from the wonderful tone produced by the choir and it threw a wrench into the intonation.

In any case, the works were performed with technical proficiency and musicality, and complimented nicely the rest of the program. One can only wonder what the Schola could do with some slightly more challenging and prickly music from our time...we can only hope and wait.

Fredrick Jodry and his talented ensemble again prove that The Golden Age of Vocal Music is alive and well in Boston, in more ways than one. I would encourage anyone who wishes to discover - or rediscover - the magic of this repertory to run out and purchase Schola’s CD from the aforementioned early music record bin, but alas - no such CD exists as of yet. I suppose this is also something we must hope and wait for.

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