

Medieval Feast

Rick Walters

The Saturday night Christmas concert presented by Early Music Now at the Basilica of St. Josephat was an unusual combination of celebration and reflection. The long-established ensemble Boston Camerata offered a delicious medieval feast of song to a large audience that turned out despite the disruptive snowfall.

Early music notation was only a sketch. Primarily vocal music with words, it did not accommodate rhythm or instrumentation. A talented, insightful scholar/arranger is needed to bring this music to life. Joel Cohen, leader of Boston Camerata, is just such a person. Without his lively interpretive guidance, there would not have been a foundation for excellent performances by three solo singers, nine women from the Milwaukee Choral Artists, and accompaniment on the vielle (a predecessor to the modern violin) and lute. The first half of the concert presented prophecy of the coming Messiah and adoration of Mary, including a sampling of medieval mystical theater with ceremonial staging. The second half was the Christmas story told in scripture readings and music. The selections came from various European cultures and periods, primarily from the 12th and 13th centuries. It hardly mattered that it was nearly impossible to understand the spoken words. Unlike larger ensembles in this space, the simple, lean music was a good fit for the notoriously quirky acoustics of the Basilica.

The tight flow of the program was as admirable as the performances. French soprano Anne Azema is mesmerizingly theatrical no matter what she sings. She has a slim, focused middle voice, perfect for the range of this music. Odd as the comparison might seem, her soprano voice has the presence of someone like Barbara Cook in musical theater. Deborah Rentz-Moore's mezzo-soprano voice was mellow and modulated, and Anne Harley's lighter soprano a constant pleasure. All the soloists lent a strong sense of phrase and intention at every moment. The women's voices of the chorus gave wonderfully blended support.

With all the ethereal melodies in women's voices rising in that glorious dome, I couldn't have been the only mortal there thinking: Is this what Christmas angels sound like?

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