

Camerata singers simply captivate

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We can all tell the difference between popular music and serious classical music, right?

Wrong. Wednesday's extraordinary concert by the Boston Camerata exploded all such distinctions.

Resisting the temptation to watch a couple of college basketball teams face off in Holland, about 450 music lovers came to Calvin College's Fine Arts Center ready for a wide-ranging sampling of unfamiliar classical genres. That is what we find on the group's dozens of recordings.

Instead, they were left in delightful confusion after the program titled "New Britain: The Roots of American Folksong."

What to make of a lilting gospel song that began life as a polka? A tender ballad about a nearly naked wood nymph that became a Christmas carol (the familiar "Huron Carol") when Jesuit missionaries carried it to Canada? An amorous song from medieval troubadours surfacing seven centuries later in a New Mexico nativity play?

With melodies and harmonies that leapfrogged across centuries and musical traditions, from the Old World to the New, the Boston Camerata and director Joel Cohen swept such questions aside. All we could do was listen -- to an evening of glorious musicianship and just plain fun.

They were in complete control, with exceptional precision of ensemble and intonation, and yet they conveyed a sense of utter relaxation and enjoyment on stage.

Anne Azema melted every heart in the house when, against the gentle background of Cohen's solo lute performance, she sang of the wood nymph's beauty in a voice powerful and gentle all at once.

Jesse Lepkoff's playing on the recorder was crisp and sprightly, on the wooden alto flute ravishing in its expressiveness.

Carol Lewis, the ensemble's longtime viola da gamba player, and Karen Walthinsen, a new ensemble member playing treble strings, performed with energy and conviction.

But in this program of every kind of song, the singers were in the spotlight.

Anne Harley's dramatic voice complemented Azema's, while contralto Deborah Rentz-Moore moved effortlessly from soprano to alto to tenor range.

The three male singers -- tenor Tim Evans, baritone Donald Wilkinson and bass Joel Frederiksen -- were called on to convey everything from moments of religious fervor to wistful sadness.

Cohen joined the male chorus for some moments of rollicking bawdiness in between, which seemed to suit him particularly well.

A set of sacred and secular settings related to familiar folk ballad "Barbara Allen" followed intermission.

On the last, a folk hymn, a few audience members joined in on the chorus. Delighted by this unexpected turn, Cohen gestured to everyone to follow suit -- and to do the same in another familiar folk song and two hymns that followed.

The evening ended, all too soon, with a rousing shapenote hymn. When the audience leaped to its feet and refused to stop clapping, the singers offered the same hymn again: "We'll all sing hallelujah!"

Was this classical or popular music? There was no answer except: stop talking and sing!

