

Back to the future:
The renaissance meets the New Millennium

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Piffaro, Philadelphia's Renaissance band, took a big risk when it devoted an entire program to a commission by a single Philadelphia composer. I thought they'd made a promising choice in giving the commission to Kile Smith, based on previous pieces he'd written and the fact that he actually sings and plays percussion with an early music group. But they were still laying a heavy bet on one composer.

In composing a work for Renaissance instruments and chorus, I figured Smith could take one of four possible approaches:

1. *Evoke a glamorized, sentimentalized vision of a past that never was.* Popular music groups have done this in the past, to produce novelty items that resemble real early music in about the same way Norman Rockwell illustrations resemble real American small town life.
2. *Create his best imitation of a piece done in authentic Renaissance style.* Make a belated addition, in other words, to a tradition that expired centuries ago.
3. *Cut all ties to the past.* Treat the instruments as an interesting new set of toys. Write in one of the standard modern avant-garde modes.
4. *Work with his own taste and musical imagination.* Follow his own personal vision and try to create the best music he could, according to his own standards.

When Smith's *Vespers* opened with four unrelated blasts from the instruments, I succumbed to a momentary fear that he'd chosen the third course. Fortunately, I was overreacting. Smith chose Option Four, and produced the kind of success I hoped he'd give us when Piffaro first commissioned this project.

Critics are supposed to criticize, so I'll mention that I felt the ninth section should have been shorter and the final *Deo gratias* should have been longer. I also felt Smith might be straining too hard to sound "modern" in the ninth section. But overall, his *Vespers* is a triumph. Piffaro took a risk on Smith and he gave them one of the major events of the music season.

Liturgical works: constantly updated

Smith did enjoy this advantage: He was writing a choral work, and the religious texts he chose

automatically rooted his work in the past that gave us Piffaro's instruments. But the liturgical tradition is also timeless. The words of the Magnificat and the Lord's Prayer have been set to music in every century, for every taste.

It's also a living tradition. The Lutheran liturgy that formed the basis of Smith's *Vespers* originated in the Reformation, but it never became static. New music is still being added. Older works are constantly re-evaluated.

Composers have traditionally enjoyed writing for specific musicians with specific musical personalities. As Smith noted in his written comments, Piffaro's regulars have a unique strength that differentiates them from musicians who play modern instruments. Every musician in the group plays several instruments, as their forebears did in the Renaissance town bands that serve as Piffaro's model. Smith's *Vespers* employs seven musicians playing twenty-three instruments.

A sonata for seven recorders

In the eighth section, the entire band plays a beautifully serene instrumental sonata for seven recorders. In the sixth section, five of the same musicians produce a rousing piece for recorders, guitar and dulcian (the ancestor of the bassoon). In other sections, they support the vocalists with a sonic kaleidoscope that includes shawns (the forerunner of the oboe), sacbuts (early trombones), harp and two kinds of lute.

The *Deo gratias* was the kind of exultant blast that Piffaro usually uses as a finale, with shawns, dulcians and sacbuts working all-out. But this time the music was written especially for them, with that kind of finale in mind, and some great voices magnifying the effect.

McNally's familiar voices

For its choral partner, Piffaro wisely turned to a group that specializes in new music. Smith's choral writing occasionally suggests chant, but mostly it appeals to our modern penchant for variety, with lots of shifts among the different voices. Smith plays with the different kinds of voices, and the different possible combinations, in the same way he plays with the instruments.

The Crossing is a two-year-old organization led by Donald Nally, with vocalists Nally has worked with during his stints with the Spoleto Festival in Italy and the Choral Arts Society in Philadelphia. They always sounded good; they possess the agility Smith's vision demanded; and their ranks include some marvelous soloists.