

MUSIC . Suite Spot

## New Made Old

**Vespers is almost preternaturally beautiful.**

by Peter Burwasser

Published: Jun 2, 2009

It is something of an open secret that Philadelphia is home to one of the finest renaissance ensembles in the world, Piffaro. Founding directors Joan Kimball and Robert Wiemken have consistently devised innovative ways of presenting their often bewitching material, but their newest recording may be their boldest project yet.

They have commissioned a contemporary composer, Kile Smith, to create a new work for their collection of sackbuts, shawms, lutes and other ancient instruments, in collaboration with The Crossing, a chamber chorus assembled by Donald Nally. Utilizing older styles in new music is a well-trod conceit — see some especially fine work from Stravinsky (*Pulcinella*) and Ravel (*Menuet Antique, Le Tombeau de Couperin*) from the last century. Then there is the hugely popular *Carmina Burana*, the 1937 cantata of German composer Carl Orff based on medieval themes. Smith's approach could hardly be more different from Orff, who fairly bangs you over the head with his fascistic pomposity. This *Vespers* is almost preternaturally beautiful, presented with an apparent simplicity that reveals the timeless essence of musical expression. But it is not at all simple, as Smith subtly weaves contemporary figurations, pacing and textures into an old fabric. It is remarkable how seamless this effect is, and how utterly self-effacing is Smith's technique. A casual listener might miss the impact of *Vespers*, but not for long. The music seeps into the consciousness with gentle stealth and power, finally disarming any resistance.

Kile Smith's day job is curator of the vast Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music at the Free Library, and he hosts a radio show on WRTI that regularly culls rarities from the Fleisher, which perhaps explains the easy eclecticism of his writing. Another vital influence; Smith was reared in the Lutheran liturgical music tradition, and so his texts are in German and Latin, as were those of that greatest of Lutheran composers, Bach.

This recording is one of those fortunate synergies of fine forces. Piffaro, as expected, plays with haunting beauty, and Nally's singers render their parts with elegant tone. Navona, a new label, has engineered ripe, lifelike sound, thanks to acclaimed Philadelphia producer George Blood. The sum of the parts is magical. Don't miss this one.