

Phila. composer beautifully blends old and new

By David Patrick Stearns
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American composers often seek audiences by turning back the clock, writing music that strives for relevance while pretending that much of 20th-century music never happened. And if there was ever an invitation to go even further than that - ignoring large parts of the past millennium - it's in the first-ever new-music commission by Renaissance music wind band Piffaro.

Yet the synthesis devised by Philadelphia-based composer and WRTI radio personality Kile Smith for his ambitious 80-minute *Vespers*, premiered in two concerts over the weekend, *updated* the clock, with music that joined hands with centuries-old Lutheran hymns without the fakery of attempting some sort of musical time travel. The results are thoroughly engaging, sometimes ecstatically beautiful - and evidence of fine compositional talent blessed with inspiration and strategy.

This practice of making ancient things modern is more common in Europe, but few such endeavors by Peteris Vasks, Giya Kancheli or Arvo Pärt have Smith's lyrical immediacy and ability to find great musical variety while maintaining an overall coherent personality.

Smith's compositional grasp isn't nearly as far-reaching or profound as these ether-probing Europeans. His basic template was conservative - 20th-century Anglican choral music - but one that welcomes all manner of augmentation. No individual element was radical, but elements were assembled and juxtaposed with intelligence and originality - and clarity of purpose you wouldn't expect after hearing the more expressively reckless pieces Smith has on his Web site.

Most immediately apparent at Sunday's performance (to a full audience at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill) was the harmonic sensitivity lavished upon the blended Piffaro winds. Thus, the piece prepared your ears to hear matters of religious importance conveyed in miniature Schütz-like strokes - as well as instilling confidence in what was to come. The choral entrance on the word "Alleluia" was seamless, and all the more breathtaking for being so cleanly vocalized by the Crossing (Philadelphia's best chorus), conducted by Donald Nally.

Choral sections were punctuated by instrumental movements also inspired by religious texts, but in music that had subsumed the words but projected them in spirit. At times, the winds had a gently bleating quality (as in Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ*), but they never lapsed into potentially cheap picturesque effects. Though a concert work, *Vespers* was close in spirit to liturgical-minded composers who wouldn't let effects eclipse words.

But you'd never say that Smith kept a respectful distance from the text. The German-language "Our Father" had block chords whose power came from their inner voices and their almost processional rhythm. Other texts took on subtle narrative with a variety of vocal solos and duets and use of recurring refrains. Formality was there, but it was completely negotiable.

During one nanosecond of horror, I feared the piece was headed toward twangy, 1970s guitar-Mass music. Instead, the borderline pop lyricism Smith brought to the "Magnificat" text was used with canonic repetition: Different voices moved slowly into synchronicity, similar to early Steve Reich minimalism.

Some moments fell back into all-purpose choral washes of sound; instrumental effects here and there misfired. The animated final "Deo Gratias" seemed like a self-conscious attempt to tie up the piece with a cheery ribbon. (I was grateful when Nally, in response to the standing ovation, encored the opening hymn.) But if anything impedes the piece's future life, it's the music's dependence on the strengths of Piffaro and the Crossing. How many great Renaissance wind bands are there in the world? How many choruses offer the intellectual understanding and technical security of the Crossing?