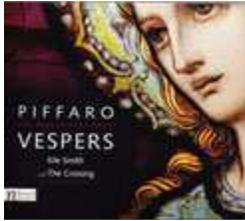


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**KILE SMITH: Vespers – Piffaro/ The Crossing/ Joan Kimball, Robert Wiemken, directors – Navona Records 5809, 65:13 \*\*\*\*\*:**

Mr. Smith is a composer based in Philadelphia who is very active in the creation of church music, as well as other compositional and musical activities. Piffaro (the Renaissance Band) is also based in the City of Brotherly Love, and commissioned this work from the composer for Renaissance wind band and chorus, loosely based on the ancient reformed tradition (well, not really ancient yet, but certainly old). As the title implies, this is basically a vespers service of the Lutheran tradition that uses the olden music as a starting point for a most enjoyable and thrillingly spiritual experience. Smith takes into consideration the considerable talents of Piffaro and The Crossing (the chorus, founded primarily in 2005 to perform music not older than 15 years), especially the penchant for the band to double and triple per person on various instruments. Though it mentions in the notes that the composer even hopes this music will find a place in contemporary worship, it certainly will not be found in this form, as the piece is too tied into the performers for easy repetition. But perhaps sections will find their way in alternate arrangements. Seldom do I come across a piece with such profoundly direct emotional appeal. I'll say it outright: this work is a masterpiece of the deepest kind, The Crossing may specialize in new music, but the sound they produce here is of a kind that Palestrina would certainly have approved, and any Lutheran congregation in the seventeenth century would think they are in heaven. Smith's use of the 20-odd instruments magnificently played by Piffaro are uncannily integrated in the very thick textures of this work, and then gloriously dissipate into brilliant solo and chamber-like combinations when called for. I'll call this music tonal with a twist; though modern, and it has some contemporary edges to it, it still feels almost uncomfortably familiar, a masterly mélange of old and new that perseveres in a way that one can feel without necessarily having to explain. The writing is brilliant in all respects, and including the score of the entire work as a series of bonus PDF files is a luxury that all listeners with a degree of musical education can take advantage of.

It is a shame that we did not get this in SACD, for it sounds as if it was made for that medium. Nonetheless, I find nothing to complain about in the sound, beautifully captured at St. Peter's Church in Malvern, Pennsylvania. Piffaro has of course made their mark on a number of labels including DGG, but the move to Navona seems a prescient one if it will involve further productions as magnificent as this. Excellent notes include texts and translations. This is easily one of the best releases of the year of any type, and it would be a crime to pass it up.

-- Steven Ritter