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NOTEWORTHY/Chestnut Hill LOCAL by Michael Caruso for 1/10/2008

Piffaro, the Renaissance Wind Band, paid two visits to the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill this holiday season. The first, on Saturday, December 22, was to perform a program of Advent and Christmas music entitled "Es ist ein Ros" after the well-loved carol best known in its arrangement by Michael Praetorius. The second, on the actual Feast of the Epiphany on Sunday, January 6, proffered the world premiere of a commissioned Lutheran Vespers Service by local composer Kile Smith.

Popular soprano Laura Heimes joined Piffaro for the former evening in what was a charming seasonal performance. Donald Nally's chamber choir, The Crossing, was the collaborative ensemble for the rendition of Smith's Vespers Service in what turned out to be one of the finest concerts I've heard in at least the last decade.

The idea of Piffaro -- an ensemble specializing in performances of music composed during the Renaissance of the 15th, 16th & early 17th centuries -- commissioning a living composer to write a score to add to its repertoire is almost a contradiction in terms. And yet, Piffaro's directors, Joan Kimball and Robert Wiemken, didn't shrink from that contradiction. In fact, they embraced it with the same level of conviction that has characterized Piffaro's development into one of the world's premiere period instruments ensembles.

Remaining in context even while breaking new ground was their motto when they commissioned Kile Smith to compose a setting of the Lutheran Vespers Service to celebrate Epiphany, the manifestation of God in the flesh as the Infant Jesus, the final feast of the Christmas season. And, recognizing the need for a chorus with which to perform the score, Kimball and Wiemken couldn't have made a better choice than The Crossing, with Donald Nally set to conduct the actual performance.

Smith met the daunting challenge of composing new music in an old form as though it were second nature to him. He has taken hold of the complex structure of 12 individual and varied movements to construct a score that proffers both cohesion of intention and diversity of expression. By opening and closing with music based on Latin Gregorian chant, he establishes the larger historical context of Vespers as an evening service of the Roman Catholic Church from which the new Lutheran Vespers has developed. By maintaining the Latin Vulgate texts of Psalms 70, 27 & 113 and the Magnificat, Smith honored Luther's intention to retain as many as possible of those portions of the Latin Rite that he considered apostolic treasures. By employing the newly written German texts of hymns, Smith acknowledged the new vernacular style of the Reformation. And by interspersing

three purely instrumental sonatas within the progression of the choral movements, Smith tipped his compositional hat to both the historical tradition and Piffaro's musical prowess.

The score, itself, is a marvelous marriage of the old with the new. Smith has beautifully combined Renaissance modality and polyphonic voice leading with modern dissonance and resolution, all with a bracing ear for blending and contrasting the tart timbres of Renaissance instruments, often sensitively supporting the choral singing but occasionally coming to the fore to dramatic effect.

His writing for the chorus is no less masterful. From delicately shaped single lines of music through complex yet transparent counterpoint into full throttled chorale-like harmonizations, Smith never fails to free the human voice to soar with the soul's inspiration. While maintaining the primacy of projecting the text, Smith's choral writing also proffers music that moves from start to finish in an unbroken arch of exposition, development and resolution that seems to unfold naturally before your eyes. The music envelops you and carries you along with its narrative, never more magnificently than in the Hymn "Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn" (God's only Son, from all time).

Under Donald Nally's direction, The Crossing and Piffaro gave Smith's Vespers a sterling performance Sunday afternoon before an audience that packed Chestnut Hill Presbyterian and rewarded the musicians with an ecstatic standing ovation. Piffaro played with consummate skill and engaging vibrancy and The Crossing sang with the technical immaculacy and interpretive intensity that has become its hallmark. Pitch, balance, blend, tone and diction were all impeccable, with soprano Shari Alise Wilson and tenor Steven Bradshaw particular standouts.

It was an altogether stunning concert that effectively brought the holiday season to a memorable consummation and that enhanced the repertoire of music for chorus and instrumental ensemble with a gem of a score.