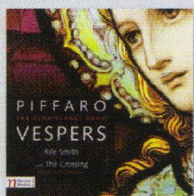


Piffaro: the musicians behind the piece



Ancient practice through modern eyes and ears – the result is a success

Kile Smith

Vespers

The Crossing; Piffaro / Donald Nally
Navona Records © NV5809 (64' • DDD)

The trend of writing new music for period instruments has passed through predictable stages of gimmickry and pseudo-Hegelian synthesis to finally be, simply, “music”. Questions of genre and authenticity shouldn’t get in the way of our enjoying a spectacular work such as Kile Smith’s *Vespers*, based on ancient Lutheran liturgical German and Latin texts. Nor should they problematise the collaboration of the Renaissance band Piffaro, who commissioned the piece, and a contemporary vocal ensemble, The Crossing.

While Smith’s knowledge of Lutheran practice informs the work, the hushed awe that floats in every movement of *Vespers* is wholly appropriate in the generic sense. The Philadelphian composer displays a tender love for the texts of his church and Martin Luther with settings that express even the Latin or German in sparkling beauty.

The Crossing intones the chant-like passages well, but its expertise shines in the shimmering timbre it creates for Smith’s contemporary counterpoint. The flowing setting of Psalm 27 is an early example, but the *a cappella* hymn “Herr

Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn” calls on its clearest and precise singing as it moves from four to eight and then 16 voice parts.

Smith’s decision essentially to background Piffaro was gutsy, but crucial to the success and balance of the piece. Its members play with sensitivity and grace, but often quietly and in clear accompaniment to the singers. That’s the case even when sackbuts enter or when the band alternates with the choir, as in “Vater unser”.

It may be authentic that a 16th-century Vespers would be arranged this way, but it fits Smith’s soundscape so well that it also was surely foremost a compositional decision. The music is choral, even if Piffaro commissioned it, and Smith stuck to that. It takes conviction for a

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commissioned composer to listen to his inner voice above the feelings of obligation to those who foot the bill. The result is a quiet yet ecstatic work that offers a profoundly contemporary view of an ancient practice.

Andrew Druckenbrod