

Sacred music vocal program packs cathedral

By Elaine Schmidt, Special to the Journal Sentinel

Dec. 11, 2011 12:24 p.m. [\(0\) Comments](#)

Amid a full roster of local performances geared to fire one up for the holidays, Stile Antico appeared Saturday evening at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist with an introspective, cleansing program of sacred music from Tudor England.

The British ensemble of 13 mixed voices was presented on the Early Music Now series, performing a sacred program built around Thomas Tallis' incomplete Christmas Mass, "Puer Natus Est." Interspersed into the Mass were pieces by Tallis' contemporaries William Byrd, Robert White, John Taverner and John Sheppard, along with a little plainchant.

The ensemble performs without conductor. They face one another, sometimes circling the Cathedral's central altar, sometimes standing in a horseshoe-shaped configuration and one standing in the aisle at the rear of the church.

The singers breathe together, phrase together and execute pristine attacks and cutoffs in perfect sync, listening and watching one another in a collaborative communication that hinges on subtle facial expressions and head movements. They also use voices that exposed lines proved to be quite different in timbre and create an astonishingly homogeneous blend.

The ensemble's sound is pure, without being academic or brittle, vibrant without being overstated or overly romantic and precise without being cautious.

Saturday's program found the singers creating a focused, unison, plainchant sound, moving like a single voice.

They set aside the idea of a singular sound for pieces such as White's "Magnificat," making fascinating colors with the unusual vocal pairings with which White painted each verse.

Throughout the program, the singers used the extremely live acoustic of St. John's like an artist uses a canvas. Enunciating their Latin texts clearly, they allowed phrases time to rise and hang in the air before landing upon and relishing the perfectly tuned harmonies of the inevitable cadences.

A few spoken program notes delivered from the "stage," augmenting those in the printed program, helped place several numbers in historical context.

Asked to hold applause until intermission and the concert's end, the capacity-plus-extra-seating crowd did just that, giving the ensemble a remarkably still, resonant space in which to perform this transporting music.

The singers answered the standing ovation that followed the program with an encore of Tomas Luis de Victoria's "O Magnum Mysterium," sung from the center of the cathedral.