

Early Music Now: Hearing the Renaissance clearly

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By Tom Strini



Stile Antico. Marco Borggreve photos courtesy of Stile Antico.

Stile Antico sang on the Early Music Now series Saturday evening and deepened my understanding of Renaissance polyphony.

I love it when that happens.

The 13 young British singers built their program around the *Puer Natus Est Mass*, which Thomas Tallis composed in 1542. Tallis followed Renaissance practice by making a Gregorian chant — in this case *Puer Natus Est (A Boy Is Born)* — the common thread for all the movements of his Christmas-season mass.

This mass, in seven-part counterpoint, is brainy stuff. Tallis followed the modal theory of his time, which governed voice-leading and constrained harmony. He made it a little tougher on himself by using numerology based on the Latin vowels in the source chant to determine rhythmic values of that chant as it threads its way through the mass. All Renaissance masses are like puzzles, as composers strove to weave imitative music into webs of inversion, retrograde, transposition, diminution, augmentation and so on, while dodging dissonances deemed unholy. Writing a mass with seven independent vocal lines is rather like designing the world's most complex freeway interchange, under the requirement that it must be as beautiful as it is functional.

The [*Missa Puer Natus Est*](#) lacks the push and pull of dissonance and consonance that makes tonal music drive forward through time. This *missa* is tranquil — even static — by design. Renaissance polyphony lacks the expressive pathos of Baroque opera and the narrative building to climax of Classical and Romantic music. It is

so brainy and complex that it becomes inscrutable. You can't follow its logic, as you can with even the most complex Bach fugue, and that always left me a little frustrated. I knew all that smart stuff was in there, but I couldn't grasp it intellectually, any more than I could grasp the permutations of a tone row as they zipped by in a Webern 12-tone piece.

[Stile Antico](#), along with the congenial acoustic of the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, showed me that my approach missed the point. The intellectualized compositional process yields a hypnotic, dream-state sort of listening experience. Its affect is more akin to [Minimalism](#) than to the polyphony of Bach. This music doesn't go anywhere; in the proper acoustical environment, its glowing, ever-shifting sonic weave surrounds you. You enter into a state of heightened awareness in which musical analysis on the fly is irrelevant. Just let it be.

Stile Antico tuned and blended perfectly and sang with a pure tone just right for this music. The singers made it easy to enter into the music. To let it be.

They interspersed Tallis' mass movements with a couple of plainchants and shorter works, all with texts related to the Nativity, by William Byrd, Robert White, and John Sheppard. White's (1538-1574) *Magnificat* stood out. This forward-looking composer shows a prescient interest in dissonance for expressiveness and shock value. It required a different listening strategy from the rest and a more pointed approach to singing by Stile Antico. The exception both proved the rule and helped us understand it.

This concert completely sold out the spacious cathedral. Early Music Now is becoming something of a hot ticket, for a lot of good reasons. If you're interested in attending the remaining three EMN programs this season, you should probably get your tickets now. Call 414 225-3113 or visit [the EMN website](#).