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Review

Anonymous 4 drops to 3, still carols flawlessly

By Elaine Schmidt, Special to the Journal Sentinel

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You know you're a professional when...one member of your quartet has to be hospitalized shortly before a performance and you go on without her.

Anonymous 4, the New York-based female vocal quartet that was presented on the Early Music Now series on Saturday, performed as a trio when one member fell ill shortly before the performance.

Their four-part harmony and blend reduced in that moment to three-part, the women regrouped and sang a remarkable performance, filling the St. Joseph Convent Chapel with their trademark ethereal sound.

Marsha Genensky, Susan Hellauer and Jacqueline Horner-Kwiatek sounded as though they had planned this program of 15th-century carols as a trio from the start.

They sang with superb control, an enormous palette of colors and the absolutely seamless blend upon which the quartet has built its significant reputation.

From pure unison sounds to ringing two- and three-part harmonies, the women stripped away the frantic clamor of our contemporary holiday celebrations and replaced it with something earnest and calm.

Sung in Latin and Middle English, many of the texts of the carols share roots with Christmas tunes and readings we know today.

The melodies and their historically informed, largely sans-vibrato deliveries brought another time to life.

In solo selections, one heard just how different their three voices are. Yet together, they became a single, bell-like sound.

The women crafted phrases in perfect concert, beginning and ending them as cleanly as though sung by a single person.

They shaped and colored each line of the music in their thoughtful deliveries with that same flawless sense of ensemble, giving the sound a heartbeat or two to decay before continuing.

The women made just a couple of program alterations to cover for their missing member.

The final number on the program, a fugal tune, was replaced with a gently lilting, delightfully homespun bluegrass carol entitled, "The Beautiful Star of Bethlehem."

The women brought the same crystalline, homogeneous sound to this little gem of a tune that's largely relegated to country music circles these days.

The women answered enthusiastic applause with a brief encore.