

Lute quartet shines on spirited tunes But slower numbers lost in venue acoustics

By ELAINE SCHMIDT
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It's not every day that one hears a lute quartet.

The internationally known Venere Lute Quartet, one of very few professional lute quartets working today, performed at the Cathedral Church of All Saints on Saturday afternoon, presented by Early Music Now.

The performers played Renaissance lutes, ranging from soprano to bass, creating a delicate, homogeneous ensemble sound - homogeneous in the way only four extremely similar voices can muster.

Only about 150 lute quartets have survived from the 16th and 17th centuries, some of which were included on the afternoon's program. The program also included a few intabulated (arranged for lute ensemble) pieces that were written for other instrumentation or voice.

The selections ranged from lively dance numbers to plaintive melodies.

Some of the tunes, for instance the "Gallarde de Roynne d'escosse" from the Thysius Lutebook, brought out lovely contrasts in texture, as well as contrasts between the individual voices of the four lutes.

The group gave a spirited delivery to Jan Sweelinck's colorful variations on the English melody "All in a Garden Green," which made the character and capabilities of each of the individual instruments quite clear.

Despite some lovely ensemble playing and thoughtful music making, some of the slower tunes, such as Sweelinck's "De Profundis," were not altogether captivating. The lutes' narrow, soft dynamic range and the swift decay of the fragile sounds were swallowed by the acoustic of the church. The result was a certain sameness from selection to selection, which was particularly noticeable on slower melodies.

The soft dynamics presented a bit of musical irony as well. Extraneous sounds, from snow blowers and cars outside the church to creaking pews and the rhythmic squeak of a foot-tapping audience member's rubber boot, were woven into the soft ensemble sound. Together, the sounds created the sort of "chance music" experience that the likes of John Cage might have appreciated.

The players gave brief comments on several of the selections and on the instruments themselves. A bit of wandering pitch that required a stop to retune brought up a lute joke - something else one just doesn't hear every day.

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Lute Revival Classical Review

[By Rick Walters](#)



Few of us have ever encountered a lute quartet. The chance to remedy that void came last Saturday evening at Early Music Now in a concert held at Cathedral Church of All Saints on Juneau Avenue. The Venere Lute Quartet presented a varied program of 16th century original music for this instrumentation, and since the repertory is slight, also arrangements of music of the period. Despite the snow, there was a sizable audience of music lovers at this 5 p.m. event.

The quartet has all the qualities of excellent music making: balance, agreement on articulation and approach, and true ensemble. Tuning is a constant battle for all lutists, but was conquered most of the time by the quartet. A single lute is a quiet sound. Four are a bit louder, but still decidedly subtle, which required careful listening. Lutes come in various sizes, comprising this quartet of soprano, alto, tenor and bass instruments.

The program was a parade of short pieces by Dutch, French, Italian and English composers, including Jan Pieterzoon Sweelinck, Michael Praetorius, Anthony Holborne, Palestrina and others. The players gave spoken introductions which, at the beginning, I worried would be too didactic and dry. But these remarks soon warmed up and became interesting and sometimes entertaining.

The pieces with rhythmic dance qualities were welcome respite from those medium to slow pieces that dominated the program with too little variety. There was certainly some appeal, but the unvarying tone of the lute and its slight dynamic range added up to some inescapable monotony. I began to long for the sound of another instrument to add to the ensemble.