

# Concert review: St Mary Schola upholds its reputation for Christmas concert excellence

The choir and accompanying musicians perform great music from the 11th to the 20th centuries.

BY CHRISTOPHER HYDE

The St Mary Schola, directed by Bruce Fithian, was founded in 2008 to bring authentic performances of early music to Maine audiences. Its Christmas concert has since gained a reputation as one of the most thoughtful and spiritual of the holiday season.

The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary in Falmouth was more than sold out on Sunday afternoon, with a crowd waiting at the door for the few remaining seats. Those fortunate enough to get in heard great Christmas music from the 11th century through the 20th, performed by a 14-member a cappella choir, often accompanied by period instruments.

CONCERT REVIEW  
WHAT: St Mary Schola

WHERE: Episcopal Church of Saint Mary, Falmouth

WHEN: Dec. 14

The selections were interspersed with readings by The Rev. Nathan Ferrell from the Gospel According to St. Luke, early English poets Henry Vaughan and John Milton, and Abbess Hildegard von Bingen.

Two unusual works served as processions, a “Verbum Patris humanatur” (the Word of the Father is made human) from the 12th century and a “Res nova mirabilis/Virgo, decus castitatis” (O new and awesome thing/Virgin, glory of chastity) from the 13th century. The latter comprises three texts sung simultaneously, a sort of “let the chips fall where they may” polyphony not heard again until the work of American composer Charles Ives. The junctions of the different tunes create a series of perfect fifths, representing the music of the spheres.

Some of the chants by Hildegard von Bingen have been reconstructed by scholars from her notations, and one, “O splendidissima gemma” (O resplendent jewel) was sung by Rachel Keller and Abra Mueller. The sound, often consisting of one voice

singing the melody over a single sustained note by the other, was ethereal. We will never know if it approaches what the abbess heard, but she would have approved. It was preceded by a lovely harmonization of the hymn, “Joseph lieber, Joseph mein,” (Joseph dearest, Joseph mine) by Hieronymus Praetorius for double choir. An equally fine work for double choir was the “Angelus ad pastores ait” (The Angel said to the shepherds) by Hans Leo Hassler.

J.S. Bach was represented by a duet from Cantata 172, with soloists Molly Harmon and Andrea Graichen, accompanied by Madeline Kapp, violin; Shannon Allen, cello, and Bruce Fithian, harpsichord.

After intermission, a chamber orchestra, including period instruments, conducted by Fithian at the harpsichord, played the Bach Brandenburg Concerto No. 6. While the performance was rough in spots, it was good to hear the work played by a group small enough so that each of the voices could be distinguished easily. The final movement was particularly good, with some excellent cello playing by Allen.

The high point of the evening was the final “Behold, I bring you good tidings,” by British composer Henry Purcell, with the orchestra and trio of soloists – John D. Adams, bass; Martin Lescault, tenor, and James M. Brown, counter-tenor.

Purcell, who died as young as Mozart, has an unmistakable voice and a genius for characterization in music that has never been equaled. The anthem performed by the Schola contains a miraculous fugue that almost seems thrown off as an afterthought. The combination of male voices in the trio is just as striking.

While the general level of performance was as high as usual, one got the feeling that the Schola had perhaps overextended itself in such an ambitious program, with some of the works not as polished as they might have been.

The program usually requests that the audience hold its applause until the completion of each half. That suggestion should be reinstated, along with a prohibition of cellphones. The latter should not have to be said concerning a religious program, but we live in interesting times.

*Christopher Hyde's Classical Beat column appears in the Maine Sunday Telegram.*