

## Review

### **Contrapunctus debuts at Trinity with "The Life and Times of Mary, Queen of Scots" (March 2)**

by Daniel Hathaway



The chamber choir formerly known as Cantores made its debut under the new name of Contrapunctus at Trinity Cathedral on Sunday afternoon, March 2, with an historically themed concert, "The Life and Times of Mary, Queen of Scots, 1542-1587."

Led by its new artistic director, English countertenor David Acres, the 19 singers expertly presented 15 exquisite church motets by English, Scottish, Spanish and Italian composers of the Renaissance, embedded into a lengthy, printed narrative of Mary's life with color images and supplemented by a few brief excerpts from her own writings delivered by actor Denise Larkin.

Performing music within its historical context with the help of images and spoken words can result in a rich experience for the listener when several streams run together to form a larger river. Mary's life was full of the intrigue that makes her narrative worthy of an opera (Donizetti thought so), but Sunday's program might have made some clearer links between events in Mary's life and the music being sung.

To be sure, the playlist included composers in the British Isles who were tossed about linguistically, stylistically and often personally by the back-and-forth religious upheavals during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, the other ("Bloody") Mary and Elizabeth I. But it also included works she probably never heard, written in cultures she never seems to have visited. Aside from a dozen years in France, she apparently spent her life on either side of the Scottish border, and may never have encountered polyphony by Spanish or Italian musicians.

The program ignored secular music — which Mary seems to have enjoyed, for she played the lute and virginals along with pursuing other royal entertainments like horsemanship and falconry.

That being said, Sunday's large audience was treated to some glorious singing engineered by David Acres, who knows the tradition thoroughly and got his choristers to create amazing arcs of polyphony that sounded wonderful in Trinity's Gothic space. The choir's

tuning and blend were close to flawless. Adding other sonorities to the proceedings, organist Elizabeth Lenti played short pieces by Cavazzoni and Tallis on the Cathedral's large Flentrop organ with agreeable touch and phrasing.

Interleaved among such standards as Byrd's *Ave verum corpus*, Victoria's eight-part *Ave Maria* and Palestrina's *Super flumina Babylonis* were rarer pieces like Clemens's *Ego flos campi*, Rore's *Parce mihi Domine*, Robert Johnson's *Dum transisset Sabbatum*, Guerrero's *Ave Virgo sanctissima* and Lobo's *Versa est in luctum* — all delightful and lovingly performed. Only Lassus's super-chromatic *Timor et tremor* sounded a bit shaky in its tuning. The concert ended with the most direct reference to Mary: Tallis's solemn *In manus tuas* sets the very words that unfortunate lady mouthed from the scaffold before the ax fell. (Alas, the three brief spoken excerpts, including a prayer Mary wrote the night before her beheading, read by Denise Larkin from the cathedral's pulpit, were mostly inaudible.)

Acres and the ensemble have made a fine beginning, and it's terrific to have another skilled chamber choir performing regularly in Cleveland. Contrapunctus will be in residence at Trinity Cathedral, but will give its next program at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist on June 6 at 7:30 pm.

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