

**Concert Report:
Pomerium at St. John's Cathedral (March 1)**

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by Daniel Hathaway



The New York renaissance choir called Pomerium has been around since 1972. After nearly four decades, the thirteen singers, led by their founder, Alexander Blachly, have accumulated years of ensemble experience but still manage to bring a fresh and newly-minted sound to the repertory of one of the most creative eras in music history.

At the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist on Monday (March 1), the ensemble explored a fascinating corner of that repertory in their program, "Mannerist Music of the Renaissance". The extensive program notes quoted Walter Friedlaender's definition of Mannerism as "an imaginative idea unsupported by imitation of nature", which is to say highly artificial, or as Blachly's noted in his verbal comments, "this is music full of disturbance and surprise". The eleven motets on the program by Andreas de Silva, Giaches de Wert, Carlo Gesualdo, Claudio Monteverdi and Orlande de Lassus "push the envelope" of Renaissance musical style toward more overt expressiveness, and all of the composers represented had some kind of relationship to the avant-garde Italian court of Ferrara.

Mr. Blachly slotted the pieces into five broad technical categories: Chromaticism, Extreme Chromaticism, Leaping Vocal Lines, Intensifying Harmonies and Unraveled Musical Fabric; and subdivided these further under emotional or affective headings: The Miraculous, Sorrow, Suffering, Remorse, Betrayal, Desperation, Terror, The Voice of God, Foreboding, Abandonment and Pathos. Pretty gloomy stuff, you would think, except that these five composers chose their texts in order to show off their compositional prowess in expressing extreme emotions. The results were anything but depressing.

De Silva's 'Omnis pulchritudo Domini' began the program on a transcendent note in its sometimes ethereal depiction of Christ's Ascension into heaven. Back on earth, Rachel wept torturously over her slain children in Wert's 'Vox in Rama', and Christ broke out into a cold sweat on the Mount of Olives accompanied by strangely juxtaposed chords in Gesualdo's 'In monte Oliveti'.

'Plorat amare' -- the first of two Monteverdi madrigals fitted out (by others) with sacred words -- was also all about tears -- here the weeping of Peter after his denial of Jesus (the original was titled 'Piagn' e sospira'). Later, the contrafactum of Monteverdi's 'Cruda Amarilli', 'Felle amaro', sets Christ's remorseful thoughts from the cross with highly theatrical mood-shifts. The first half ended with Gesualdo's strongly expressive Maundy Thursday responsory 'Judas, mercator pessimus'. It's easy to see how the always inventive Gesualdo appealed to such 20th century composers as Peter Warlock and Igor Stravinsky: his fresh-sounding music still surprises the ear.

Only thirty minutes had passed at this point, but there was more concentrated intensity in this half hour than in most full-length choral concerts. Still, the audience was ready to take in more.

After the break, three theatrical, madrigalesque motets by Wert were sung in a row. 'Egressus Jesus', a depiction of Jesus' strange conversation with a Canaanite woman, narrated the story in straightforward homophony, then turned dramatic as the dialogue intensified. 'Ascendente Jesu' told the tale of Jesus calming the sea, colorfully depicting the waves and the disciples' cries of "Save us! We are perishing", as well as the great calm at the end. 'Saule, Saule', a text famously and also very dramatically told by Heinrich Schütz, was busy and intentionally chaotic.

After the previously mentioned Monteverdi 'Felle amaro', Pomerium turned to Gesualdo's famous 'O vos omnes', perfectly tuning its oddly juxtaposed harmonies. The concert ended with a work by the normally very conservative Lassus

(who nonetheless also showed up to see what was happening in Ferrara). 'Vide homo', like 'Felle amaro', is a monologue by Christ about the pains he has suffered for an ungrateful humankind. Though this motet's Mannerism was mild compared to other works on the program, it did begin to demonstrate the dissolution of polyphonic texture that would become almost complete in the early Baroque.

Throughout the evening, Pomerium sang with fine intonation and blend, presenting these interesting (and difficult) works with authority and confidence. Although the program was on the short side, one left feeling totally satisfied with the experience. For those who wanted more, Pomerium graciously offered two encores: short and unman-nered motets by Byrd and Lassus.