

Contrapunctus to present May 31 concert, “The Glories of Spanish Polyphony”

by Daniel Hathaway



British countertenor David Acres will lead the professional singers of Contrapunctus Early Music in a free program of vocal music by Spanish composers of the 13th to 17th centuries on Sunday, May 31 at 3:00 pm in Mary Queen of Peace Church on Pearl Road in Old Brooklyn. “We hope people will come and enjoy music they’ve never heard before,” Acres said in a telephone conversation.

In contrast to the rest of the continent, Iberian music largely kept to itself during those centuries — there was little cross-fertilization between Spain and other European cultural centers. “Alonso Lobo and Tomás Luis de Victoria are not at all like William Byrd and Thomas Tallis. Spain is a very different experience,” Acres said.

And those of us who have been taught that the art of polyphony originated with Leonin, Perotin, and other composers associated with the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris will be surprised to hear contemporaneous works by Alfonso X, King of Castile, León and Galicia (1221-1284). “Along with other Spanish composers of his time, Alfonso was very advanced,” Acres said. “He wrote four-part polyphony and loads of other music. And he was a scientist, astrologer and academic who authored many books. His music is very exciting, very raunchy.”

Acres has planned Contrapunctus’s program around Victoria’s six-voice *Officium Defunctorum*, a requiem written in 1603 for the funeral of the Dowager Empress Maria, the sister of King Philip II. “We won’t sing the entire piece — which lasts about 45

minutes — just the Introit, Kyrie and Gradual,” Acres said, “and we’ll end the concert with a piece Lobo wrote to the same words. One has more verve, while the other is more maudlin.”

The program will also visit music by Cristóbal de Morales (c1500-1553), Francisco Guerrero (1528-1599), Sebastián de Vivanco (1551-1622), and Juan Esquivel Barahona (c1560-c1625). “Morales is mostly known for his Masses, but we’ll be singing some of his motets,” Acres said, adding that the audience should notice a gradual change in musical character as Contrapunctus moves from the 13th to the 17th century. “The earlier works are more stark, nasally and hard-toned. The later pieces become softer as composers adopted the technique of word-painting.”

Contrapunctus’s spring concert was originally intended to present the music performed at the Coronation of King George II of England in Westminster Abbey in 1727. That concert has now been bumped to the fall, to Sunday afternoon, October 25. “We wanted a good-sized choir for that repertoire,” Acres said, “but late May is a very busy time for singers. In the Spanish repertoire, you can achieve more feeling from fewer singers without having to produce a massive sound.” The Coronation concert will also take place in Mary Queen of Peace Church. “It’s a huge space,” Acres said. “It lends itself to fanfares of trumpets and drum rolls. You can stage-manage a production there and have the singers process around the church for Tallis’s *Litany*.”



David Acres has years of experience in organizing concerts. He launched his own choir in the U.K. in 1989, and together with Judith Overcash Acres, he now runs Counterpoint and two sister organizations in the United States. Contrapunctus Early Music was founded in Cleveland in 2013, and The King’s Counterpoint in 2014 in Charleston, South Carolina, Judith’s home town, where the Acres now reside.

Contrapunctus's forthcoming concerts will be offered without admission charge, a change from the ensemble's previous policy. "In the U.K., we're used to giving a lot of free concerts. Attending programs like this shouldn't be a matter of being well-heeled," Acres said. "One of our tenors told me that he couldn't afford to hear our concerts before he joined the group. We want to achieve a high performance standard with the right sponsorships and donations. We shouldn't ask the singers to sing for nothing, or not pay the churches where we perform. We decided to push quite heavily so we could get to a level where everyone can come for free."

How is that working out for Contrapunctus? "We're doing well," Acres said. "We believe that once people hear the product, they'll respond."

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