

Tallis Scholars in “War and Peace” at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Apr. 13)

by Daniel Hathaway



In their most recent appearance at the Cleveland Museum of Art, Peter Phillips’ renowned British vocal ensemble, Tallis Scholars, dedicated a program of sacred Renaissance music — with a couple of modern insertions — to those who lost their lives in the First World War from 1914 to 1918.

The program in Gartner Auditorium on Friday, April 13, began with the striking monophonic song *L’Homme Armé*. From there, selections were arranged in the format of a Mass setting whose opening Kyrie was from Josquin’s parody mass based on “The Armed Man” tune.

Although it might have been enlightening to continue with Josquin’s Mass — the craggy outlines of *L’Homme Armé* are easy to pick out of the polyphonic texture — Phillips chose Guerrero’s *Missa Batalla* for the Gloria and Credo, Victoria’s *Missa pro Defunctis* for the Offertory and final Libera me, Guerrero’s *Missa L’Homme Armé* for the Sanctus, and Palestrina’s *Missa Papae Marcelli* for the Agnus Dei.

Between those movements, we heard two Renaissance motets and two 20th-Century works: Mouton’s *Quis dabit oculis*, Lobo’s *Versa est*, Arvo Pärt’s *The Woman with the Alabaster Box*, and John Tavener’s *Song for Athene*, sung at — but not written for — the funeral of Princess Diana.

The Tallis Scholars have been at the top of their profession since the group was founded in 1973, and the ten artists who visited Cleveland this month continue their long tradition of perfectly blended, tonally focused, wonderfully tuned singing. Used to making their lines heard clearly in the cavernous acoustics of cathedrals, the group brought unusual presence to their performance in Gartner Auditorium on Friday — a space in which performers onstage can sometimes seem a bit remote to the audience. Phillips conducted with minimal gestures, shaping lines with infinite gradations of subtlety and never getting in the way.

Although the Scholars presented the polyphony on this program with elegant style and sophistication worthy of the works' exquisite craftsmanship, the two modern works were standouts. Pärt's narrative of the woman who comes to anoint Jesus' feet is quietly dramatic but mostly hypnotic in character. Tavener's graveside motet takes its cues from the Eastern Orthodox liturgical tradition. Its ritualistic repetition finally bursts into glorious Alleluias, one of the few ecstatic moments in a largely sober and reflective program.

Perhaps the only regret anyone could have was that this British ensemble included only one piece of English music on Friday evening's program.

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