

Mignarda in “Byrd songs” at St. John’s Cathedral (Feb. 24)

by Daniel Hathaway



Mignarda, the longstanding soprano-lute duo of Donna Stewart and Ron Andrico, doubled its forces at St. John’s Cathedral on Sunday afternoon, February 24 for “Byrd songs,” a program of devotional and liturgical music by William Byrd. By adding José Gotera and Malina Rauschenfels to their roster, Mignarda created a splendid vocal quartet who sang revelatory versions of Byrd’s *Mass for Four Voices* and *Ave verum corpus* in the second half of the concert.

In their program notes, Stewart and Andrico wrote,

Today, Byrd’s liturgical music is typically performed by large mixed choirs or ranks of choir boys garbed in Victorian surplice. Performances of Byrd’s consort songs with devotional texts unquestioningly employ a soprano voice at the top of her range, accompanied by an ensemble of wheezing viols. But a little probing reveals that Byrd published his music specifically for domestic use by English Catholic recusants, obliged to celebrate Mass discreetly in private households with whatever vocal or instrumental forces were to hand.

They went on to explain that in addition to performing the mass and motet with one-on-a-part voices, Mignarda would observe the much-overlooked convention that late-16th-century music notated in high clefs was intended to be sung four notes lower than written, resulting in a more relaxed vocal sound.

Following those practices paid off in singing of uncommon expressiveness and intimacy. It was entirely possible to imagine yourself hearing these pieces at a clandestine mass in a Catholic country house of the time, even though you were actually sitting in the vast acoustic of St. John’s Cathedral. Stewart, Rauschenfels,

Gotera, and Andrico blended their voices superbly and visited every nuance in Byrd's imaginative music. The motet, with its astringent cross-relations, was especially poignant.

The singers stood for the second half of the concert, which allowed for significantly better projection. In the first half, they were seated for a liturgical introit and a series of devotional solo songs with lute, which were next to inaudible halfway down the nave.

Too bad, because this genre is Mignarda's specialty, and what could be heard of the singing was first-rate. Malina Rauschenfels did double-duty at one point, singing while playing the bass line on a gamba — very likely something that would have been done in the domestic scene of an Elizabethan manor house.

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