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Piffaro takes Manhattan in Monteverdi's 'Vespers'



By David Patrick Stearns Inquirer Classical Music Critic

NEW YORK - The great masterworks of the hazy past increasingly stand among the established Bach-Beethoven-Brahms musical monuments...

Monteverdi's largest sacred work - and a piece that constantly tops itself with dizzying antiphonal effects - has been the object of cult admiration...

Now, the sprawling 100-minute collection of alternately sacred and erotic music is being heard more widely than ever in this 400th anniversary...

For Piffaro admirers, the concert was also an opportunity to hear the group as something other than the center of its own concerts...

Typically, vespers were loosely assembled from existing collections of music. Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers stands apart as a consciously composed entity...

Monteverdi eschewed the more ethereal manner of the past, infusing his texts with a kind of humanity that we now describe as operatic.

That sense of maximum variety amid effortless unity was particularly apparent under the direction of ARTEK director Gwendolyn Toth.

The unique conversion of performance circumstances was felt on other fronts. The first violinist was the widely recorded baroque specialist Enrico Gatti...

He and Piffaro codirector Joan Kimball also provided a moment in the climactic Magnificat that's often ignored: The score asks for oboelike shawms...

Of course, there's a danger that Monteverdi could seem reorchestrated, as in early recordings of Nikolaus Harnoncourt.

Contact music critic David Patrick Stearns at dstearns@phillynews.com.

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