



DAVID PATRICK STEARNS



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Piffaro takes Manhattan in Monteverdi's 'Vespers'

By David Patrick Stearns
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NEW YORK - The great masterworks of the hazy past increasingly stand among the established Bach-Beethoven-Brahms musical monuments, though in the case of Monteverdi's *Vespers* of 1610, one might need musical forces from three cities - New York's ARTEK, Washington's [National Gallery of Art](#) Vocal Ensemble, and Philadelphia's Renaissance wind band Piffaro - to make sure nobody ever forgets that.

Monteverdi's largest sacred work - and a piece that constantly tops itself with dizzying antiphonal effects - has been the object of cult admiration from unlikely places, conductor [Michael Tilson Thomas](#) and composer [Osvaldo Golijov](#) to name two, alongside the early-music community that determined over small increments in recent decades how the piece should sound.

Now, the sprawling 100-minute collection of alternately sacred and erotic music is being heard more widely than ever in this 400th anniversary of its publication, though Wednesday at a packed St. Ignatius Loyola on Park Avenue here, the circumstances were singularly luxurious.

For Piffaro admirers, the concert was also an opportunity to hear the group as something other than the center of its own concerts, functioning as one of Philadelphia's early-music exports in a piece whose expensive demands make it rare at home.

Typically, vespers were loosely assembled from existing collections of music. Monteverdi's 1610 *Vespers* stands apart as a consciously composed entity that also codified an early-baroque manner that would stand for the next century or so.

Monteverdi eschewed the more ethereal manner of the past, infusing his texts with a kind of humanity that we now describe as operatic. Each line of text, whether psalms or from the Song of Songs, is characterized with a specific inner emotional life, one that becomes its own miniature world, but also coheres within a larger picture.

That sense of maximum variety amid effortless unity was particularly apparent under the direction of ARTEK director Gwendolyn Toth. Singers weren't the dutiful conservatory grads often heard in Europe's early-music festivals, but more seasoned singers who clearly had something personal to bring to the music - and did, particularly tenor [Matthew Smith](#).

The unique conversion of performance circumstances was felt on other fronts. The first violinist was the widely recorded baroque specialist Enrico Gatti, who brought confident charisma to the score's mini-concerto passages. The music's harmonic bedrock was projected not just by two arch-lutes but by Piffaro's Christa Patton on harp. The viol group Parthenia was uncalled for by the score but certainly appreciated for its demure richness within the instrumental texture. So many instruments pitted against 12 voices posed no balance problems. In fact, Piffaro's Robert Wiemken (playing recorder) was placed within the vocal ensemble to help anchor the singers.

He and Piffaro codirector Joan Kimball also provided a moment in the climactic Magnificat that's often ignored: The score asks for oboelike shawms, but was long thought to be a misprint since shawms were outdoor instruments. The effect felt like yet another instance of Monteverdi's adding yet another intoxicating sound at a point in the piece where you thought you'd heard everything.

Of course, there's a danger that Monteverdi could seem reorchestrated, as in early recordings of Nikolaus Harnoncourt. But here, more sound expanded the scope of what the Monteverdi *Vespers* can be.

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