

# KCMETROPOLIS - Lionheart warms large audience on a cold night

Early Music Review

by R. Douglas Helvering 2008-12-04



If a friend had told me that on Thursday night one of the world's best six-voiced male vocal ensembles was to present a concert of masterfully interpreted and exquisitely performed music from medieval England, I would have asked what time the King's Singers were performing. There was such a concert on Thursday night, but the ensemble was Lionheart, one of America's leading chamber music vocal ensembles.

Sponsored by The Friends of Chamber Music's Early Music Series, Lionheart presented an evening of mature, elegant, and refined music-making. The program, entitled *Tydings Trew: Feasts of Christmas in Medieval England*, took the audience on a musical journey through the twelve days of Christmas (Christmas Day to the Feast of Epiphany on January 6.)

Based in New York, Lionheart has been dazzling concert-goers for 10 years. They are best known for their interpretation of unaccompanied vocal music from the Renaissance and medieval periods, with Gregorian chant forming the keystone of their repertoire. From the first notes heard at Thursday's concert, performed in the wonderful acoustic of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, the all-male Lionheart captivated the audience's attention and held it through the entire performance. They sang the opening hymn, the chant *A Solis Ortus Cardine* ("From Where the Sun First Rises"), while walking throughout the sanctuary. The singers overcame the challenges of singing on the move, presenting the chant with conviction and extreme unity of sound.

The program included a diverse collection of antiphons, canticles, carols, motets, and hymns. The languages sung were a mixture of Latin, Old English, and Middle English, all presented with impeccable diction. The first set of songs focused on the Annunciation. The highlight of this set was the carol *Hayl Mary, Ful of Grace... The Holi Goste*. This selection's last stanza was sung with great expression and at a marvelously penetrating soft dynamic. The second set presented songs from the Nativity, highlighted by the carol *A, My Dere, A, My Dere Son*. This song had a wonderful blooming opening, starting with a single tenor voice, then adding baritone, then bass, then finally the entire ensemble. Another highlight was the hymn *Sancte Dei Preciose* ("Treasured Marytr") with text on Saint Stephen. The sextet divided into two trios with one trio providing sustained pedal tones while the other sang the hymn. The pedal notes were so in tune that a wonderful bouquet of overtones rang throughout the sanctuary. In another instance of artistic placement of singers, the carol *Worcepe We This Holy Day* brought a trio of singers into the middle aisle to sing, making great use of the room's spatial acoustics as well as providing visual interest.

Lionheart sang the program without an intermission, which meant that there was no applause between selections. As a result, the pacing of the program was wonderful. The ensemble effortlessly moved between selections, often moving from one song to another without stopping to re-pitch. The audience was obviously drawn into the experience, as there were surprisingly few extraneous sounds. As the performance drew to a conclusion, Lionheart sang the motet *Gaude Virgo Mater Christi*. The third stanza, with text translated as "You, our hope and advocate, are wholly revered by the populace, leading some, though they be tainted, from the depths through the highest, sainted regions beyond where stars go.", provided the musical and emotional climax to the entire evening. The music soared, and the vocals were exuberant.

After retiring to the back of the sanctuary during the last selection, the canticle *Nunc Dimittis*, Lionheart received a well-deserved reception. They then thrilled the audience with a rich rendition of *In The Bleak Midwinter* as an encore. If you missed the performance, fear not. Lionheart has a recording available (*Tydings Trew: Medieval English Carols and Motets*) with many of the same selections as was heard Thursday night.

As Friends of Chamber Music President Cynthia Siebert told the audience in a pre-concert talk, the men of Lionheart represent not only the best of music-making but also a microcosm of America – striking a delicate balance between cherished individuality and the responsibility to a shared ideal. On a very cold December night, Lionheart successfully struck that balance and gave a large and appreciative audience a meditative and spiritually warming performance to remember.