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## **Stile Antico at St. John's Cathedral**

Early Music's holiday gift

Culture Club – *by: Paul Kosidowski* –| Monday 12/12/2011

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Of the four key ingredients of music – melody, harmony, rhythm and timbre – harmony reins supreme in the 16th-century choral work of Thomas Tallis. Famous for his intricate and often complex use of shifting, sustained chords he once wrote a motet for 40 different vocal parts – Tallis' music doesn't so much flow past you as descends on your ears like a sweet and radiant cloud.

It did just that Saturday night when the British choral ensemble, Stile Antico, brought Tallis' seven-part Christmas mass to the Cathedral of St. John, along with other British choral music from Tallis' era. The concert was part of Early Music Now's 25th Anniversary season.

Taking full advantage of the spacious and sonically rich environment, the group sang from several different spots in the church, including the very center, where they stood in a circle around a massive stone altar.

This is only possible because the 12-member Stile Antico performs without a conductor. Instead, they assemble so that the group's members can make eye-contact when necessary, and they move through the slow procession of the music in a gentle lock step, with an occasional authoritative nod to initiate a phrase or cut off a resonating chord.

It's easy to think of this music – with its wide-open harmonics and slowly shifting colors – as a kind of trance music. But the writing of Tallis and others of his era is quite complex and harmonically fluid. Follow closely, and you'll hear the kind of harmonic invention that lead right into the Baroque era, even if there are only occasional touches of counterpoint.

But if it is something more than trance music, the singing of Stile Antico is still mesmerizing. A welcome anachronism amid the ambient noise of the 21st century, the music filled the sold-out cathedral with the soft, reflective spirit suited to the year's end.