

# Stile Antico Captivates at Early Music Now Concert

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By Rick Walters



The art of collaboration between humans is a continuing life lesson. Sometimes when individuals come together, even with shared ideals, things can go south. Other times people work together in a happy and rich process, and remarkable results are possible. Such dynamics naturally are in play in any musical collaboration, and can be especially challenging when the ensemble is a democratic one, without a leader or star. In all styles, the musical past and present are littered with groups that could not continue because they could not get along.

I have no knowledge of the collaborative process involved with the young British vocal ensemble Stile Antico, a conductorless group of 13 women and men. The sold-out concert performed Saturday evening at the Cathedral of St. John showed that whatever they do to get there, Stile Antico creates arresting music. The coming together of individuals happens in the very best sense. Communication occurs constantly as the singers look at one another. Technical ensemble issues (beginning phrases together, ending together, and other such details) could not have been better.

Though Stile Antico has Anglican purity as its core, it does not stop there. After all, purity can become monotonous. The ensemble's sound evokes freedom of expression and richness of texture, with voices coming forth when the phrase invites it, a tangible representation of the group's democratic makeup.

This high-minded program of Advent and Christmas music featured movements of the unfinished mass *Puer natus est* by Thomas Tallis, complex music of intricate, extraordinary design. It was complemented by other British composers of the 16th century, including William Byrd, Robert White, John Taverner and John Sheppard. Beautifully phrased plainsong chants, a basis for most of the music heard, were sprinkled in the program. A favorite choral work of the season was offered as encore, Victoria's *O magnum mysterium*, the only non-British music heard.

Though it does not have one of the city's largest arts budgets, the Early Music Now series presents some of Milwaukee's most memorable concerts. This was one of them. The large audience listened as though captivated by a meditative spell.