

MUSIC REVIEW

Some Old (Very Old) Christmas Favorites

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

Published: December 18, 2007

Given the vast repertory composed to celebrate Christmas, it's mystifying that such a tiny slice of it is heard year after year. Most ensembles stick to traditional carols, Handel's "Messiah" or a few relevant Baroque works. But Christmas is also a time when early music specialists like Frederick Renz and his Early Music New York are in their element. Mr. Renz has always taken the view that forgotten favorites of Christmas past — long past — are worth revisiting, and he invariably assembles engaging, well-researched programs that lift the holiday out of the modern hyper-commercial world.

This year Mr. Renz is exploring Dutch music from the late 15th through mid-17th centuries at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, with vocal settings specific to Christmas sung by nine men, and instrumental dances and variations performed on four recorders and lute. Some of the instrumental works performed on Sunday were thematically tied to Christmas: Jacob van Eyck's virtuosic recorder variations on "O zaligh, heyligh Bethlehem" ("Oh blessed, holy Bethlehem") and Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck's similarly flighty "Ons is gheboren een kindekijn" ("A child was born to us"), for example, were played after the more serene vocal settings of those melodies.

There is probably no reason that some of the dances, like Tielman Susato's zesty "Mon Desir" or Jacob van Eyck's florid "Boffons" variations, could not have figured into a Christmas celebration. But the Christmas links to Benedictus Appenzeller's "Buvons, ma comere" ("Let's drink, old gal") or the anonymous "Wy comen heir gelopen"

(“We have come here walking”) — basically drinking songs — require further pondering.

Still, most of the Dutch vocal works contemplated the Nativity, like the anonymous “O Herders al soetjens” (“Oh shepherds, all sweet”) and “Nu zijt wellekome” (“Now be welcome”). Included as well were Latin works, most notably Philippus van Steelant’s lively “Fistulis, lyris et organis” (“With pipes, lyres and loud instruments”) and Guilielmus Messaus’s rich-hued “Nato nobis Salvatore” (“Now that our savior is born”).

The contrast was striking, and one of the more interesting aspects of the program. Though composers of both Latin and Dutch works put a premium on contrapuntal invention and melodic richness, the Dutch settings were generally earthier and more robust. At the time this distinction may have been fraught with the tensions between Catholicism and the Reformation, but with four centuries intervening, the view seems more purely musical and social, with the Latin settings presenting a formal, elevated view of Christmas, and the Dutch ones offering a more emotionally direct street-level version.

Early Music New York repeats its Dutch Christmas program on Sunday and on Christmas, at 3 and 8 p.m. at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, Amsterdam Avenue at 112th Street, Morningside Heights; (212) 280-0330, earlymusicny.org