

Daniel and the Lions
By Judith Newmark
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Time travel -- the best kind, time travel of the imagination -- came to town on Friday night, when Early Music New York cast its spell for St. Louis Cathedral Concerts. Its performance of a medieval liturgical drama, "Daniel and the Lions," melded twin impulses: the urge to worship and the urge to create art. The vivid performance was made to order for its setting, the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis.

Director Frederick Renz's ensemble infused the Basilica with the haunting sounds of chants and strange old instruments. Visually, the performance was just as rich, incorporating colorful costumes, snazzy lighting effects and staging that echoed the stylized poses of figures on ancient triptychs. The troupe delivers performances so lucid that you don't need to understand the words, which were in Latin. Playing the prophet Daniel, James Ruff soared in an eloquent aria explaining the meaning of "the writing on the wall" to King Belshazzar (Paul Shipper). Shipper created two memorable characters himself.

First -- in a purple silk crown that resembled the Kremlin - he won hearts as the king who, touchingly, greets his doom by playing a sad tune on a lute. Later, he created another appealing character, the virtuous but comical prophet Habukkuk. When an angel - an imposing, sweet-voiced figure portrayed by a man named Ryland Angel, of all things - visits Habukkuk, he shakes with fear, throwing his hands into the air. Who wouldn't! But he also obeys and helps Daniel avoid the wrath of the lion, a magnificent, outsized puppet brought to life by three men.

Early Music New York makes the story easy to understand on many levels at once -- and without benefit of language. For example, its version of the defeat of Belshazzar -- which involves an army of men in chain mail, marching to drums and bagpipes -- replaces the image of two antique Eastern powers in conflict with an image that the first audiences of "Daniel" might have easily understood.

It's an image of the Crusades, an image of the West at war with the East. Can we perhaps find some way we might relate to that today? Scampering through time, Early Music New York invites us to visit the past and discover a mirror. It adds up to an impressive feat of the imagination, and of hard work.