

Music of Henry VIII by David Katz November 5, 2006 Besides being King of England, father of Elizabeth I, founder of English Protestantism, and the downfall of many wives, Henry VIII was a composer and patron of music. Early Music New York, one of the best Early Music ensembles in the world, put the music of Henry and his time on display in a concert titled "The King's Musick – Henry VIII and the Tudor Court Circa 1510-1520". The result was a lively and thrilling performance of splendidly composed secular music, drawn from period manuscripts, including the Fayrfax Ms., the Ritson Ms., and Henry VIII's Song Book (no, the Song Book does not contain the classic, "I'm 'Enery the Eighth I Am ...").

Early Music New York, under the Direction of Frederick Renz, is celebrating its 32nd anniversary this year. Its programs are always well organized, with an interesting mixture of tempos, textures and subject matter. The Henry VIII concert grouped its pieces into subject groupings, with at least one instrumental and two vocal pieces in each section. The performers, a male choir of ten voices ranging from alto to baritone and two or three instrumentalists, ably supported the rich harmonies and complex ornamentation that are the hallmark of Tudor period music. In addition to Henry VIII and the ever popular Anonymous, composers represented included William Cornish, Robert Cooper and Edmund Sturgis. Those compositions directly attributed to Henry were actually quite good; he could have made it as a composer if his day job had not been so demanding.

Hunting was a major theme. Sections titled "Call to the Hunt", "Stalking the Game", and "The Chase" testified to the interest the king and his courtiers took in this sport. Most of these songs and instrumental interludes were spirited, but a few, such as "I Have Been a Foster" were melancholy. "Blow Thy Horn, Hunter", with its rauschpfeif solo phrases, was especially delightful.

Henry's contributions to the concert included the instrumental "Taundernacken", with its haunting recorder melody beautifully played by Wayne Hankin, "Helas madame", a love song in French in which, ironically considering Henry's own history, the singer promises to have no other love as long as he shall live, and "The Kinges Balade", in which Henry proposes "hunt, sing and dance" as a cure for the evils of idleness.

Although Early Music audiences tend to be knowledgeable about period instruments, Early Music New York always has a few really unusual ones to describe to the audience. In this concert, the tenor bagpipe, with its unusually long chanter and horn-tipped single drone, the rauschpfeif (an encapsulated reed shaum that is a real screamer), and the bass viol, one of which in "Lady Wynkfylds Rownde" was plucked and strummed, rather than bowed, were the subject of a short, post-intermission talk.

The performers (James Blachly, alto and bass viol; Jesse Blumberg, baritone; Oliver Brewer, tenor; Corey-James Crawford, alto; Scott Dispensa, baritone; Jay Elfenbein, bass viol; Wayne Hankin, winds; Matthew Hensrud, tenor; Jonathan Kline, tenor; Lucas M. Weiss, baritone; and Geoffrey D. Williams, alto) are professionals in the best sense of the word. Their performances were flawless, a tribute both to their own natural talents and to the direction of Dr. Renz.

Three concerts remain in this year's series: A Medieval Christmas, December 22, 23 and 25 at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Georg Philipp Telemann, March 24 at St. James Church, and Franz Joseph Haydn, April 21 at St. James Church.