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MUSIC REVIEW | ENSEMBLE FOR EARLY MUSIC

## Reviving the Baroque Approach to Christmas

By ANNE MIDGETTE

**L**ike many Christmas concerts, the Ensemble for Early Music's program at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine on Sunday afternoon opened with a medley of popular carols. Popular, that is, in 17th-century Scotland. And if none of the tunes are common currency today, the piece "All Sons of Adam" from 1666 showed that the medley form, at least, has endured.

Packing a world tour into an hour and a quarter, the ensemble offered Baroque music from six countries in small, telling snapshots. For the French set, Frederick Renz, founder and director of the Early Music Foundation, arranged sections of Marc-Antoine Charpentier's "Messe de Minuit" and other pieces to form a French suite: overture, gavotte, minuet and so forth. The "Messe de Minuit" was also filled with quotations from popular carols, but the only tune familiar to today's audience came from a different source: the gigue, which Charpentier wrote as a drinking song in a Molière play, which is now known as "Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella" (Mr. Renz gave it a different, 17th-century text).

German chorales and jovial English ballads showed off the ensemble work of the six vocal soloists, who, despite a few pitch problems, were generally good. Eric Brenner, a countertenor, sang with feeling and color. Little solo passages in "Los Que Fueren de Buen Gusto," a humorous form of Spanish song called a xacarilla, offered glimpses of Oliver Brewer's attractive round tenor and Gregory Purnhagen's melodious baritone. And Joe Chappel was a warm bass anchor, blending his rich voice with the lighter forces above it. Joining them were Christa Patton on harp, the urbane Grant Herreid on plucked strings (from theorbo to Baroque guitar) and Patricia Ann Neely on the bass viola da gamba.