

MUSIC REVIEW

## Court Sessions Held Uptown

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Suddenly it was Tudor England in Morningside Heights, at least musically. On Saturday evening, the viol consort Fretwork built its program at the Miller Theater at Columbia University around music of the 16th and early 17th century English court. And on Sunday afternoon, at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, Early Music New York offered a rich program of vocal and instrumental works from the time of Henry VIII, including a handful of the king's own pieces.

The two concerts could hardly have been more different. Fretwork's focus was on Jewish composers who thrived at the Tudor court. It isn't entirely news that many of the musicians employed by Henry VIII and Elizabeth I were Jewish; the musicologist Roger Prior explored this point in detail in a 1983 issue of the *Musical Quarterly*. But it is a curiosity: in 1290 England expelled its entire Jewish population and did not officially allow them back until 1656, yet by the 1540s Jewish musicians imported from Italy -- including two musical dynasties, the Bassanos and the Lupos -- were plentiful in court wind and string ensembles.

What did this mean musically? Not a lot. The Pavans, Airs and Fantasias by Augustine and Heironymus Bassano and Theophilus, Thomas and Joseph Lupo bear no hint of synagogue chant and are the very definition of Tudor court music: dark, slow-moving and often overwhelmingly melancholy. On the other hand maybe that's the key. After all Jewish music has a lachrymose strain as well. Maybe the sound that we've thought of all along as English is actually Jewish. Who knew?

Fretwork looked beyond England for other works by 17th century Jewish composers, among them two lively Monteverdian pieces by Salamone Rossi, and two gracefully flowing symphonies by Leonora Duarte. There was a modern touch as well. The second half of the program was framed by two sections of Orlando Gough's "Birds of Fire" (2001), a quirky score that depicts a Jewish ensemble

performing at an Austrian spa in 1939, gradually weaving klezmer themes into the waltzes.

Fretwork was at its solid best, but Miller Theater is a dry hall for a viol consort. Early Music New York played on its home turf, the cathedral, where the vibrant acoustics suit these sounds better. And it presented the more unbuttoned, vernacular (and mostly anonymous) side of Tudor music. The program was arranged to suggest the stages of an amorous pursuit, with its successes and failures, ending with Henry VIII's vigorously cheerful "Pastime With Good Company."

For the occasion this flexible ensemble was a vocal octet that mostly sang unaccompanied and with a winning robustness that reflected the primary-color passions of the texts. An instrumental ensemble -- James Blachly and Jay Elfenbein on gambas, and Wayne Hankin on an arsenal of early wind instruments -- played a handful of dances and supported the choir in a few songs.

The next Early Music New York concert is "A Medieval Christmas," Dec. 22, 23 and 25 at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, 1047 Amsterdam Avenue, at 112th Street, Morningside Heights; (212) 280-0330 or [earlymusicny.org](http://earlymusicny.org).