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MUSIC IN REVIEW

Early Music New York Frederick Renz - Director

By CORINNA DA FONSECA- WOLLHEIM

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Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Early Music New York in “Istanpitta: A Medieval Dance Band” at St. John the Divine on Saturday

Early Music New York opened its season on Saturday evening with an invitation to dance, in a program of medieval instrumental music that highlighted the intertwined roots of Western and Middle Eastern music. The program’s title, “Istanpitta,” refers to a type of dance music, estampie in French, which features repetitive rhythms underneath subtly changing harmonic material. The technique creates both a narcotic effect and a certain propulsive energy, not unlike the ragas of Indian music or even the electronic dance music of today.

The program alternated French examples taken from the *Chansonnier du Roi* with slightly more sophisticated Italian dances, but the greatest variety came from the array of textures the six players created with an arsenal of instruments including flutes, bagpipes, shawms, lute and organistrum, a kind of hand-cranked harmonium. **The versatility of the musicians was impressive;** some took up half a dozen different instruments in the course of the concert. But there was at times an excessive earnestness to the music making, due perhaps to the solemn intimacy of the church’s St. James Chapel or to the proximity to Columbia University. The program notes were evidently written with an academic audience in mind.

The most directly communicative playing came from [Yousif Sheronick](#), whose wizardry on a range of humble frame drums enlivened each piece he joined in, and from [Wayne Hankin](#), who played bagpipes with the soulful abandon of a medieval John Coltrane.

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