

Carols Solemn, Joyous, And A Beat Ahead Of The Omicron Humbug

By **Jack Sullivan** - December 24, 2021

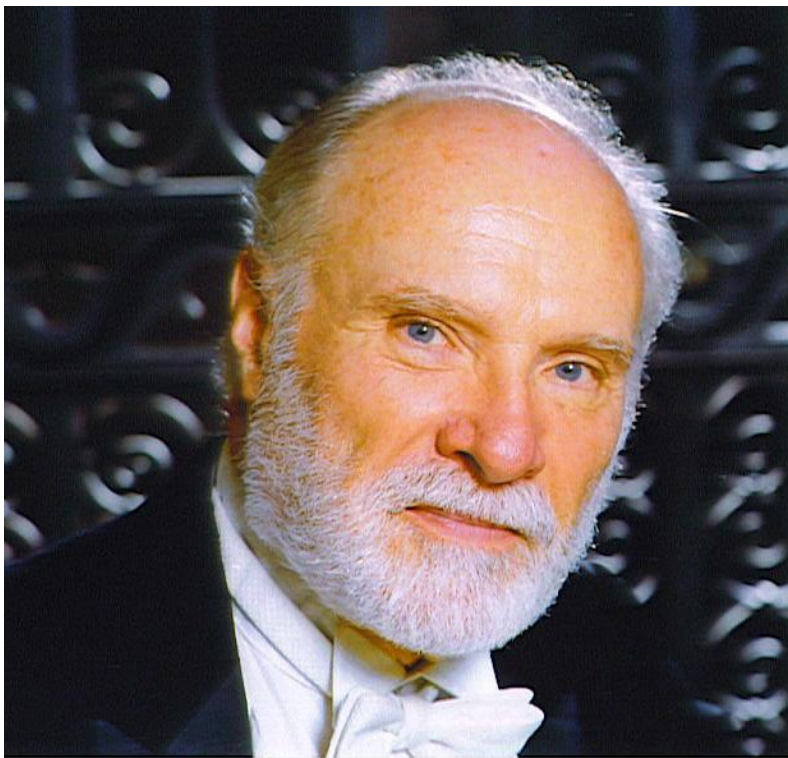


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NEW YORK — “No sermons, just music.” That’s the philosophy of [Frederick Renz](#), founder-director of the [Early Music Foundation](#) and leader of [Early Music New York](#), whose male choir performed the first of its annual Christmas concerts Dec. 19 in the [Cathedral of St. John the Divine](#). (I’m glad I didn’t wait to go until Christmas day, as I usually do: Those concerts and those the day after were canceled because of Omicron.) Renz offers no introductory speeches, as we often get (usually at pedantic length) in old-music concerts, just witty, learned program notes. It’s all music, with no intermission, much of it tantalizingly obscure.

This year’s program, “A Tudor Christmas,” offered music during the reign of reign of monarchs Henry VII, Henry VIII, and Elizabeth I, concluding with New Year ditties from the 17th century. It took place

in Synod Hall just south of the cathedral, not as intimate as St. James chapel two years ago, but oddly appropriate, as the hall has a faintly Tudor look. Unlike St. James, Synod doesn't have gorgeous stained-glass windows, but the acoustics are gratifyingly live, not churchy but quite reverberant. Carols, noels, motets, chants, and secular tunes provided a rich and varied experience, from the ethereal to the boisterous. This combination of ancient chant, golden-age polyphony, and rollicking drinking songs was an ideal holiday gift for a Scrooge like me who has grown weary of the Neo-Victorian kitsch that our culture insists is Christmas music.



Frederick Renz, director of Early Music New York

Like Early Music New York's 2017 "Burgundian Christmas," the organization of the program allowed the audience to hear music move gradually from austere 15th-century open sounds toward the fuller, more intricate polyphony of the Renaissance. Composers included [William Cornysh](#), [Christopher Tye](#), [William Byrd](#), [John Dowland](#), [Thomas Ravenscroft](#), and [King Henry VIII](#); the first part of the concert was a cappella, but many of the pieces in parts two and three were accompanied by recorders, lute, guitar, and viola da gamba.

The concert began with anonymous 15th-century carols, offering a combination of austerity and jubilation. Harmonies were spare, sometimes nonexistent, but the radiant purity of the voices was consistently uplifting. The bounciness of the rhythms in the opening Hail Mary reminded us that many old carols were based on pagan dance songs associated with the winter solstice. Slower pieces such as "Marvel Not, Joseph" and "There Is No Rose" had an exquisite tenderness. The most memorable were "Nowell, This Is the Salutation" and "Lully Lullay," which featured haunting solo renderings of lost monophonic tunes alternating with choral sections. An otherworldly atmosphere was evoked by distant pedal points in the upper register of the choir.

After a brief pause following the Henry VII carols, the instrumentalists came to the front of the stage for parts two and three. The sounds they provided contributed to fuller textures as the music progressed toward the 17th century. Instrumental numbers such as the "Lute Lullaby" had a remarkable delicacy, fully audible in the hall; others such as "La bounette" were swingy and joyous. The longest and most developed, [Robert Johnson's](#) variations on "Greensleeves," showed off the excellence of the entire ensemble.

The music composed during the time of Henry VIII and Elizabeth mixed the secular with the sacred, the bawdy with the angelic, sometimes between selections, sometimes within the song itself. A soaring "Ave Maria" by Cornysh was followed by his "Trolly Lolly Lolly Low," which begins with one lover pursuing another in the woods and concludes with a verse praising God. The repetition of "I" sounds both here and in Tye's "Sweet Was the Song the Virgin Sang" ("Lulla, Lulla") exemplified how these composers used the sounds of words as music, blending poetry and sound in a way we normally associate with more recent music.

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A moment of irony was provided by the sweetness and solicitude of a love song by King Henry VIII, "Green Groweth the Holly." Given how King Henry made away with his wives, lines like "Adieu mine own lady/adieu my special" were downright creepy. (According to the notes, Henry VIII was quite prolific, with some 33 compositions of his own written for "disguisings" and seasonal revels.)

There was a great deal of unknown music (Anonymous was the most frequent composer), but the concert offered the work of well-known masters as well. Some of the most expressive and satisfying music came from the best-known of all, William Byrd. Byrd is known for keyboard, instrumental, and pleasantly conservative vocal music — solo voice numbers accompanied by viols — but the soaring polyphony in the Latin sacred works on this program, "Deo Gratias" and "Beata Virgo," displayed a more complex, mystical side of his sensibility. Christopher Tye was represented with "A Sound of Angels from Afar" and "Nunc dimmittis." His music offered warm sonorities and rapturous cadences that wafted through the hall with just the right amount of echo. Cornyish's "Ave Maria" had a similar richness and warmth, a style of polyphony quite different from the subline remoteness of Palestrina and his school.

The concert ended boisterously with short monophonic songs and instrumental numbers celebrating the new year. All the forces, vocal

and instrumental, let loose with “Tosse the Pot,” a weirdly appropriate finale given the new rise of the Omicron virus that spiked the very day of the concert and resulted in several empty seats: “Toss the pot, let us be merry and drink till our cheeks be as red as a cherry” — precisely what I did after this life-affirming concert.

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Jack Sullivan is chair of English at Rider University. He has written for Opera, Symphony, the Chronicle of Higher Education, American Record Guide, New Grove, Wall Street Journal, New York Times Book Review, Washington Post Book World, the Kurt Weill Newsletter, and other publications. He has contributed program notes for Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, the Wexford Opera Festival, BAM, and Spoleto USA. His book Hitchcock’s Music won the 2007 ASCAP Deems Taylor Award for excellence in writing. His most recent book, New Orleans Remix, won the ARSC Certificate of Merit.