

Intimate Musical Arts in Elegant Space - The Boston Musical Intelligencer

by [Cashman Kerr Prince](#)

The Cantata Singers chamber series at the American Academy of Arts & Sciences in Cambridge continued Friday night. In “My End Is My Beginning,” Amy Lieberman conducted works spanning centuries and styles; the singers complied with fine execution in Norton’s Woods Center.

To serve as the organizing conceit, Guillaume de Machaut’s *Ma fin est mon commencement* framed the program, a trio of musicians singing the refrain to start the evening and setting the circular interplay of beginnings and endings. The singers then offered Pärt’s *Solfeggio*, a meditation on the building blocks of Western harmony crafted around the C-major scale. From simple came complex, as Pärt used the combined scale and singing exercise to profound and mystical effect even as the harmonies charted new tonalities. A great difficulty is to maintain intonation across octaves and colliding dissonances; the ensemble met this challenge (like all others this night) and enjoyed themselves on the journey. From contemporary to early: the show moved next to Clément Janequin, *Toutes les nuictz*, a reflective setting of a secular vespral text on love and dreams. Then back to contemporary: select singers offered Luciano Berio’s *Cries of London*, I–V. Based on the cries of hawkers selling their wares, this composition defamiliarizes the familiar: alternately we hear cries as shouted, syllables broken apart, the resulting sound resembling the twittering of birds. This is a setting rich in creative mishearings, the commonplace becoming a Modernist work, not unlike sonic residue in London today.

Norton’s Woods Center at AAAS

Following intermission, we returned to Janequin, this time his *Le chant du rossignol*, which playfully summoned many species of bird—not just the nightingale. Jérôme Mouffe, guitar, joined the singers for Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s *Romancero Gitano*, in seven movements. At times the choral part brought to mind de Falla’s *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*; the guitar was melody and harmony, color and support, a moving force. The second movement, *La Guitarra*, delighted with its interplay, a more prominent guitar line and the voices performing a love-song to it. “Puña” unleashes the dramatic depths of the instrument, making for a more passionate number. The middle movement, *Procesión-Paso-Saeta*, narrates a Holy Week procession with the music rising to operatic heights, turning prayerful, then relaxing into a minor-keyed pathos which plumbs the tragic, like an El Greco canvas. Memento offers flowing vocals over a dotted rhythm, while *Baile* exploits varied shades of dance in culture to tell a large story from a snapshot. Finally, in *Crótalo* voices become castanets. Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s music is rich in affect and heard here to great effect. The closer, Machaut’s *Ma fin est mon commencement*, Mouffe featured two of the singers accompanying on three guitars. Intriguing, palindromic, and strophic piece, the piece makes much of little, crafting a proto-madrigal from the fancy.

Short yet rich, the evening ran around an hour and a half with a break, but never felt rushed; nor did it leave one feeling bereft. The performances all hued to the high standard we expect from the Cantata Singers. The space is a treat: architecturally an amalgam of Danish modern, traditional Japanese, and ancient Roman styles, it provides a spacious and resonant acoustic. Columns conflicted with sightlines but not the sound. This intimate setting enhanced the experience, bringing the audience into the journey. The commendable concert proved joyful in artistry, intelligent in programming, and superlative in execution.

Cashman Kerr Prince, trained in Classics and Comparative Literature, is now a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Classical Studies at Wellesley College. He is also a cellist of some accomplishment, currently playing with the Brookline Symphony Orchestra.

Share this: