

ECMS presents Red Priest
March 2, 2018

By Morgan Luethe

The sensational musicians of baroque-gypsy ensemble *Red Priest* played to a thrilled audience in the acoustically-blessed Robertson-Wesley United Church on the evening of March 2nd. The group's style of performance was an engaging departure from what audiences might have come to expect from these sorts of the concerts in the past, and perfectly complemented the evening's spicy, eccentric program. Gilded goulash was on offer as the night's entertainment and it was eagerly devoured by a grateful Edmonton audience.

Referring to *Red Priest* as baroque ensemble doesn't capture what they're all about. While each member of the group is a supremely-gifted specialist with a profound understanding of the music of this period, they're also acutely aware of the deep connections between baroque decadence and grandeur and the rustic earthiness of European folk music traditions. This symbiotic relationship was immediately apparent in the first programmed item, a *Gypsy Sonata* by Telemann. Overtop the sturdy, robust structure of the composer's original score (already flavoured with what anemically passed for "gypsy" influences in the day), *Red Priest* layered breathtakingly virtuosic cadenzas that expertly reflected the genuine spontaneity so attractive in the music of the Roma people.

The evening's program aimed at highlighting the "gypsy craze" that gripped Western European aristocratic courts from the 16th onward, featuring supposedly Roma-influenced works by composers of the Late Renaissance in addition to later Baroque-era fare. The *Gypsies' Round* of William Byrd (of which the only gypsy trait is its title) was brought thrillingly to life through the group's well-placed improvisatory tangents just as Richard Nicholson's *The Jew's Dance* was helped along in a similar way. While European instrumental music of the pre-Baroque centuries is pervaded by a formal flexibility that aligns well with the fiery Roma idiom, it's these two traditions' shared grounding in dance music that makes for such a compelling blend.

Apart from the consistently exquisite performances of the evening, one of the most engaging aspects of this concert were the musicians themselves. Decked in vibrant gypsy-inspired garb, the players of *Red Priest* proved masterful handlers of their audience. Taking full advantage of the physical space the venue provided, these musicians, at times, wandered the aisles whilst playing and brought an enticing, immersive quality to their sound; for a group of only four performers, they easily expanded their music to completely fill the concert space. Adding fullness to the overall experience, *Red Priest* took the time in | by Morgan Luethe between pieces to introduce and expound on the music they presented, giving much appreciated context to the performances, and enhancing their audience's appreciation for what they heard.

Red Priest is a prime example of a refreshing trend in Early Music. Through their interactive and humanizing approach to performance, they elevate the listener to the level of the music they present. Their dual passions for the folksy flair and jaw-dropping virtuosity of Roma music and the decadent splendour of the Baroque combine to form a blend irresistible to the ear. Baroque music *should* be taken off its aristocratic pedestal and placed back on the earthy dance floor from which it originated. With the help of *Red Priest*'s gripping, gypsy-inflected accounts of the works of such composers as Telemann, Biber and Vivaldi (among others), a rapport is struck between the music and its audience.

Likely taking the cake for the season's most unconventional concert, *Gypsy Fever from Campfire to Court* proved to be a program of that opened ears and minds to marriage of folk and aristocratic artistry.