

ECMS presents The Tallis Scholars

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By Morgan Luethe

Rounding out the ECMS' last event of its regular 2018 concert season was, arguably, the year's most affecting performance. The renowned Tallis Scholars, one of the world's preeminent chamber choirs, presented their program *War and Peace*, in commemoration of the lives lost in the First World War. Not only did the group mesmerize listeners with the purity and clarity of their sound; this concert also shed an important spotlight on an area of the chamber repertoire that tends to be overlooked by the mainstream audience.

Presented works by Josquin, Palestrina, and Pärt offered the audience an opportunity to experience both early and modern masterpieces of acapella vocal music, and to appreciate its complexity and sonority. In the hands of Peter Phillips and the Tallis Scholars, music featured on this program fully permeated both audience and venue alike. While it offered little in the way of memorable, hummable tunes (musical simplicity was clearly *not* a priority for composers like Victoria and Guerrero), it certainly left listeners buzzing and begging for more, as evidenced by the most enthusiastic and longest applause this season!

War and Peace, for the most part, featured selections drawn from the mid-to-late renaissance, though work the aforementioned Pärt, as well as Tavener made the its way onto the program as well. With the theme of remembrance dictating the musical queue, and with the featured repertoire being almost exclusively of the 16th and early 17th centuries, it's no surprise that religious music figured heavily in the evening's offerings. If there was any suspicion that the program might be a little on the predictable side because of this however, they soon evaporated with the group's opening number, *L'homme armé*, a secular song of the French Renaissance. It quickly became apparent that the Tallis Scholars could sing a shopping list and still make the ear go mad for it.

The Tallis Scholars, with their ethereal, clean sound were perfectly suited to the acoustics of Robertson-Wesley United Church. During their performances of Pärt's *The Woman with the Alabaster Box*, and the *Angus dei* from Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli*, all movement in the space seemed to have paused; it was clear that all audience members were sharing a similarly profound, immersive listening experience. The care and devotion with which the Tallis Scholars handle this music is evident and, though from a distant time and place in history, their thoughtful and moving interpretations highlighted a relatable intimacy in this material that's just as palpable to listeners half-a-millennium removed. There's something special about the sound of human voices organized into a complex polyphony, and it *might* lie in the interesting contrast between the intricacy of the musical structure and simple naturalness of the instrument that brings it to life.

It shouldn't be surprising, after reading the above, that the Tallis Scholars were rewarded by listeners with thunderous and sustained ovations. With many members of local choral groups represented in the audience it's safe to say that the program had been well-appreciated by concertgoers familiar with this repertoire. Only after a short encore, a second selection from the Victoria *Missa pro Defunctis*, were the Scholars allowed to take their final bows. A superb finale to a superb season of music. This was not the Tallis Scholar's first appearance in Edmonton and, judging by the adoration heaped upon them by the enamored Edmonton audience, it won't be the last!