

# Choral Reviews

*Steven Grives, Editor*

*Vespers* (2008)

Kile Smith (b. 1956)

SSSATB soloists from within the choir

SSAATTBB choir of at least 16 singers

Renaissance band of seven players with the following instruments:

recorders: 2 soprano, 2 alto, 3 tenor, 2 bass (G, C), contrabass, great bass

shawms: 2 soprano, alto, tenor

dulcians: tenor, bass, quartbass, octave bass

two sackbuts

harp

Renaissance guitar, lute, theorbo

Website: <http://kilesmith.com/>

Score: available from composer,

AU.IMPRINTS, \$21.00 full score, \$13.00

vocal score, \$75.00 parts.

Texts and forward by the composer:

<http://kilesmith.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/vespers.pdf>

Recording: Smith, Kile, *Vespers*. Piffaro, The Renaissance Band and The Crossing, Donald Nally. Navona Records NV5809. April 28, 2009. Compact disc.

## Movements

1. Veni Sancte Spiritus (TB—ATTTB recorders, sackbut)

2. Hymn. Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern (SATB—SSAT shawms, 2 sackbuts, theorbo)

3. Introit. Psalm 70 (T. solo, SATB—AT shawms, TBQb. dulcians, 2 sackbuts)

4. Sonata a 5: Steht auf, ihr lieben Kinderlein! (SA shawms, 2 sackbuts, Qb. dulcian)

5. Psalm 27 (SATB soli, SATB—SSBg.Bc. recorders, sackbut, B dulcian)

6. Sonata a 5: In dir ist Freude (SAT recorders,

TB dulcians, Renaissance guitar)

7. Psalm 113 (SATB—2 sackbuts, harp)

8. Sonata a 7: O süßer Herre Jesu Christ (AATTTBGb. recorders)

9. Hymn. Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn (SATB div. a 16)

10. Magnificat (SSS soli, SATB—TBOb. dulcians, 2 sackbuts, harp, theorbo)

11. Vater unser (SATB soli, SATB—AATB recorders, SA shawms, TB dulcians, 2 sackbuts, lute)

12. Triple Canon: Nun danket all und bringet Ehr (SSTTBGb. recorders, sackbut)

13. Deo gratias (Choir 1 SATB, Choir 2 SATB—SAT shawms, B.Ob. dulcians, 2 sackbuts)

In 2007, Piffaro, the Renaissance Band, commissioned Philadelphia-based composer Kile Smith to "... write an entire evening of new music."<sup>1</sup> This led to a collaboration between Smith, the early music specialists of Piffaro, and The Crossing, a professional choir specializing in new music directed by Donald Nally. Premiered in 2008, the resulting composition, *Vespers*, combines the liturgical structure and texts of a Renaissance Lutheran vespers service, with historical instrumental colors, and Smith's

<sup>1</sup> Kile Smith, "Vespers," Kile Smith: Composer, accessed February 21, 2015, <http://kilesmith.com/vespers/>.

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unique compositional language. *Vespers* is an extraordinary accomplishment that warrants recognition and performance by college and university ensembles.

*Vespers* is a highly sophisticated work, inspired by what Smith describes as "... the musical flowering of the Lutheran Reformation."<sup>2</sup> The Lutheran *Vespers*, as it existed around the time of the Reformation, form a structural base for the composition. The result, however, departs from its liturgical source. As Smith writes, "My intention was not to compose a liturgy, but to create a concert work infused with the spirit of this liturgical tradition."<sup>3</sup> Though liturgy is the structural underpinning the work, Smith uses text and music to take the performer and listener on a journey of contrasting textures and colors. The pairing of historic instrumental sounds with contemporary harmonic language and counterpoint seems, at first, counter intuitive. However, the colors of the period instruments are simultaneously ancient and entirely new. The sometimes raw timbres of the instruments infuse *Vespers* with energy and momentum from beginning to end.

In *Vespers*, Smith chose texts that are, or relate to, psalms for the Epiphany season, that he notes emphasize "light, kingship, deliverance, and the appearance of a Savior." The liturgical and psalm texts are in Latin, while other texts originally intended for the congregation, such as chorales and the "Vater unser" ("Lord's Prayer"), are in German.

Chorale tunes are the most recognizable musical element of the Lutheran Reformation and appear throughout *Vespers*. Smith describes them as

<sup>2</sup> Smith, "Vespers," <http://kilesmith.com/vespers/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

"the essence of the Lutheran musical gift to the Church." Often they appear in instrumental *sinfonias*, rather than texted movements for choir. However, texts and translations for these tunes are printed with the rest of the movements at the beginning of the score and, often, in concert programs. This allows the modern listener to experience the emotional impact of these tunes and their place in the larger work.

*Vespers* begins with "Veni Sancte Spiritus" ("Come, Holy Spirit"), scored primarily for instruments alone. It opens with a hollow, open fifth between two tenor recorders. The recorder consort that follows accompanies a sonorous melody played by a sackbut, setting the sonic space for the audience. The tenors and basses finish the movement with a chant-inspired melody on "Alleluia."

No sooner has the "Alleluia" finished than the shawms and theorbo launch the next movement, "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern" ("How brightly shines the Star of Morn") that uses the full choir for the first time. Smith passes the chorale tune, for which the movement is named, between the soprano and alto lines. Each vocal line has a life of its own, dancing around the other voices. Smith does not write "filler" lines for the sake of harmony, but instead writes contrapuntally; each line is its own melody-making the work a joy to sing and to hear.

Following a setting of Psalm 70, the pleading "Deus in auditorium mum intende" ("Lord, make haste to deliver me"), and the Chorale "Steht auf, fir lieben Kinderlein!" ("Get up, dear children, see what cheers") set as an instrumental sonata, the fifth movement is a setting of Psalm 27 ("The Lord is my light and salvation"), for two soprano recorders, choir, and optional recorders

*colla parte*. This movement is a twelve-minute tour de force for the choir. Smith alternates a homophonic refrain, with verses that change throughout the movement. It is exciting to discover in each verse how Smith treats the text. His use of subtle rhetorical gesture and text pairing are masterful.

This introspective psalm setting is followed by perhaps the most joyful instrumental movement of the piece. The German chorale tune “In dir ist Freude” (“In thee is gladness”) is an exciting contrast and an interesting juxtaposition to the preceding movement. The recorders begin with a buoyant rendition of the chorale. They are joined by dulcians, adding a bright color that serves to define the rhythmic counterpoint. Finally, a Renaissance guitar joins the other instruments solidifying the movement’s dance-like character.

The ninth movement is choir’s second hymn, “Herr Christ, der eyng Gotts Sohn.” This chorale is set *a cappella*; first in four parts, then eight, then sixteen, and finally in four parts again. Smith’s contrapuntal language shines here, as each vocal line, even in sixteen voices, is beautiful and melodic. Remarkably, the sixteen-part verse presents one of the most beautifully intimate moments of the whole work.

An exquisite setting of the Magnificat for soprano and alto voices follows. The opening solo line reoccurs as a refrain four times. In the first three repetitions, a new canonic voice is added. The fourth repetition adds, not another voice, but the chorale tune “O Jesu Christe, washers Licht” (“O Jesus Christ, the Light so true”) sung by the tenors. The combination of both the texts and melodies is a truly remarkable moment in the piece.

Following an exuberant doxology at the end of Magnificat is a setting of Martin Luther’s German, metric translation of the Lord’s Prayer, or “Vater unser.” The recorders and a single sackbut follow this with a setting of “Nun Danket All Und Bringet Ehr” (“Now raise your thanks up to the Lord”).

The final movement, “Deo gratis” (“Thanks be to God”) begins with yet another chant-like melody for choir. However, it suddenly bursts into a joyful call and response for double chorus. This highly rhythmic music is made all the more exciting by the forward, driving color of shawms, dulcians, and sackbuts.

In *Vespers*, Smith blends music of intense contemplation and exuberant joy. The sounds that result from his masterful instrumentation and harmonic language are as exciting and intense as they are beautiful. Instrumental and vocal colors, rhythms, and harmony are uniquely suited to deliver the rhetoric of the text. The brilliance of this composition lies in the treatment of text on several levels. It is clear that Smith has a large, structural conception of how each text relates to the larger work. Within each movement, words and sentences are set with careful attention to their rhetorical structure. Finally, each uses subtle text painting to further elaborate his interpretation of the text. The interplay between rhetoric and melodic counterpoint is one of the true joys in both performing and hearing this work. When the rhythm and rhetoric are emphasized, another layer emerges and the music dances off of the page.

The instrumentation, length, and vocal demands of this work will be daunting for many choirs. As a result, *Vespers* is best suited for an advanced choir. If a university or community has access

to highly skilled Renaissance instrumentalists, this work provides a unique opportunity for collaboration. If performing the complete work is not feasible, several movements are easily extracted (including the sixteen part chorale “Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn” and “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern”), and some are published as individual octavos (including “Psalm 113” and “Magnificat”). In addition, if the composed historical instrumental resources are unavailable, contemporary equivalents can (and have) be substituted. However, one must be aware of potential issues of transposition when using modern instruments.

The recording of *Vespers* featuring Piffaro and The Crossing is perhaps the best introduction to this work. *Vespers* is an exhilarating work to perform, and the audience reaction to hearing it is incredibly enthusiastic. Each individual line, verse, and movement offers its own unique reward. Collegiate, community, and professional choirs would serve both their audiences and their singers well by performing this work.

—*Christopher Windle*