



About New York Polyphony

"Their voices blend into a rich, natural sound that's larger and more complex than the sum of its parts." (NPR)

"...four male singers of superb musicianship and vocal allure." (The New Yorker)

"It was extraordinary how the past and present blurred. The new sounded old, and the old sounded strikingly fresh and immediate." (The Denver Post)

"Their performance epitomized what truly fine singing is all about...Intelligence, subtlety and consummate artistry." (Richmond Times-Dispatch)

About Sing Thee Nowell (BIS 2014)

57th GRAMMY-Award Nominee for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble
Critic's Choice Best of 2015 (American Record Guide)

"This is an outstanding disc combining beautiful performances with fresh and interesting compositions..." (Early Music America)

"...a spacious and radiant retreat from the hype and hassle." (The New York Times)

"The warm, resonant tone of vocal quartet New York Polyphony shines on this recording..." (Minnesota Public Radio)

About Times go by Turns (BIS 2013)

56th GRAMMY-Award Nominee for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble
Best of 2013 Classical Releases (iTunes)

"For a demonstration of how sumptuously beautiful the music of the English Renaissance can sound, you could scarcely do better than this superb new release by the vocal quartet New York Polyphony." (San Francisco Chronicle)

"New York Polyphony continues to claim a spot as one of the finest small vocal groups performing today." (Audiophile Audition)

"...a complex, clear-eyed yet still painfully beautiful tapestry." (Gramophone)

About endBeginning (BIS 2012)

"This recording is a must for fans of Renaissance or contemporary polyphony." (Early Music America)

A Top Ten Notable Classical-Music Recording of 2012 (Alex Ross, The New Yorker)

About Tudor City (Avie 2010)

"...a stunning tour through chant, polyphony and renaissance harmonies." (Minnesota Public Radio)

"Exact standards, a magnificently rich, reverberant acoustic... and a smart selection of [repertoire] make this an uplifting, rewarding release." (Classical WETA 90.9)

About I sing the birth (Avie 2007)

"One of the season's best is New York Polyphony's I sing the birth." (Gramophone)

"The four male members of New York Polyphony... sing most alluringly, superior technique a given but never flaunted... This is my Christmas CD of 2007." (BBC Music Magazine)



Early Music America

New York Polyphony Travels To Eternal Rome

Karen Cook | October 25, 2016

Founded in 2006, New York Polyphony has racked up mountains of well-deserved praise. Over the last decade, the ensemble has developed a world-class reputation for stellar musicianship and programming dedicated to both early and contemporary music. On their sixth album, *Roma Æterna*, the singers—countertenor Geoffrey Williams, tenor Steven Caldicott Wilson, baritone Christopher Dylan Herbert, and bass Craig Phillips—break with their own tradition and return to the past, focusing for the first time exclusively on early music.

The recording begins with Francisco Guerrero's motet *Regina caeli*. The quartet next brings in supplementary voices (Tim Keeler, Andrew Fuchs, Jonathan Woody) to tackle Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's famous six-voice *Missa Papae Marcelli*, interspersed between chanted Propers for Easter Day, and his *Tu es Petrus*. They return to their core four voices for Tomás Luis de Victoria's *Missa O quam gloriosum*, based upon his own earlier motet, and interject Victoria's and Palestrina's settings of "Gaudent in coelis" before ending with Palestrina's motet *Sicut cervus*.

The thematic connections between the compositions, and even the album's name, run deep. Rome was (and still is) the "eternal city," a melting pot of international styles in various musical establishments and yet a conservative papal stronghold. Both Palestrina and Victoria worked in Rome; Palestrina was summoned by Pope Julius III to become the *magister cantorum* at the Cappella Giulia in 1551, later joining the Sistine Chapel Choir. Thanks to a later marriage, he had the financial stability to continue composing into his later years: over 100 masses, more than 300 motets, and a great number of other sacred and secular compositions survive.

Victoria, on the other hand, was a native Spaniard, as was Guerrero; Victoria left Spain for Rome at the tender age of 17 and six years later succeeded Palestrina as the chapel-master of the Roman seminary. Although he returned to Spain in 1587, Victoria came back to Rome briefly for Palestrina's funeral in 1594. Guerrero, however, never traveled to Rome; instead, he went to Jerusalem, the other "eternal city." The two settings of "Gaudent in coelis" were included in large part because of Victoria's jubilant repetition of the phrase "exultant sine fine"—"rejoice without end," a fitting tribute to the eternal nature of his adopted city.

The exceptional quality of the recording might also make listeners rejoice without end. In this day and age, there are plenty of recordings of the Pope Marcellus Mass, as urban legend surrounding its salvation of polyphony in the Church has caused it to be one of the best-known Renaissance compositions. The one-on-a-part approach here, though, makes it a stand-out option: far from being cautiously reverent, this rendition moves, swelling and dying like so many waves coming in to the shore. In this, as in the *Tu es Petrus*, the slightly faster tempos and the richly diverse timbres of the individual voices really make the antiphonal writing stand out.

Ivan Moody makes a comment in the liner notes that Palestrina writes "without ever losing a feeling of forward propulsion, of the dynamic springing from the static," and in fact that statement is a perfect summary of the album. The ensemble sings with great drive, careful yet powerful phrasing, and unified purpose. Most highly recommended.



Mittelbayerische

Perfection from the New World (translation)

Andreas Meixner | May 26, 2015

The four singers from New York present a moment of glory in the Minoriten Church at this years Tage Alter Musik

The spectacular highlight of this year's Tage Alter Musik came from the Big Apple: The singers of New York Polyphony gave a presentation of pure perfection in the Minoriten Church.

It must be some Middle-European arrogance that makes one doubt of ensembles from overseas: Can these four men named New York Polyphony offer an unblemished interpretation in the proper style? They can.

At the start of the concert, entitled *O quam gloriosum* on Whit Monday in the Minoriten Church, the short marian hymn *Regina Caeli* by Francisco Guerrero illustrated the high quality of the performance. Craig Phillips (bass) and Christopher Dylan Herbert (baritone) provided a firm foundation but maintained a shared rhythmic pulse with Geoffrey Williams (countertenor) and Steven Caldicott Wilson (tenor), who were flexible and slender in their phrasing. The jubilant *Gaudent in Coelis* by Tomás Luis de Victoria illustrated the joyful nature that this music can bring. The singers embodied the alla-breve rhythm, and did not relent until the last phrase, clearly and concisely floating the last chord until it faded away in the large nave.

The same high standard carried over to their interpretation of the mass *O quam gloriosum*, also by Victoria. Not only did their interpretation of the text become more vivid, but the four singers also reached musical climaxes with organic interconnectivity. In addition, they trusted the reverberation of the room in order to avoid an overstated and static delivery. Palestrina's *Gaudent in coelis* succeeded as superbly as the *Lamentations* by Francisco de Peñalosa which closed the concert. Early vocal music in perfection – from New York!



La Croix

New York Polyphony: Four boys in the wind of Vézelay (translation)

Emmanuelle Giuliani | August 22, 2014

On Tuesday, August 21st, the first concert of the Rencontres de Vézelay 2014 Festival presented the four singers of the ensemble New York Polyphony.

Just as much as the group was serious in their approach to music, they were equally playful in their speeches to the audience. Indeed, they knew how to seduce and captivate their listeners.

A visual description might be purposeless, but it does add to the charm to the concert offered this past Thursday, August 21 by New York Polyphony for the Rencontres de Vézelay Festival. Upon viewing the four artists, impeccably dressed in well-cut suits with silky ties of a delicate purple hue, one could not help but compare the sight to the generous wisteria clusters just outside the Church of Notre-Dame de Saint-Père. It made one ask if the delicate comparison of nature and culture through color coordination would help to satisfy the eye just as much as captivating the ear.

With a communal breath and shared phrasing, the likes of which are virtually unknown in France, the American vocal quartet, comprised of countertenor (Geoffrey Williams), tenor (Steven Caldicott Wilson), baritone (Christopher Dylan Herbert) and bass (Craig Phillips), has the potential to quickly become a known quantity here. The first impression one hears from them is a perfect cohesion that results in a common spirit and unwavering accuracy, shared phrasing, and dynamic homogeneity.

The singers undoubtedly possess outstanding voices, unlike their British colleagues, the King's Singers, for example. Furthermore, the fusion of the individual voices produces an unexpected alchemy. This is expressed by a shared body posture, gaze exchanges, and even a slight rocking movement while they sing.

A journey through time

Over the course the hour-long concert magnified by the refined acoustics of the Église de Saint-Père, New York Polyphony took the audience on a voyage from the late seventeenth century with William Byrd, to 2012 with a "Kyrie" composed by Andrew Smith, and then returned to the sixteenth century with Thomas Tallis, and then once again to 2012, with a very sumptuous "Ite Missa est" by Gabriel Jackson. This final piece is sets words with clipped staccato syllables.

Although the program included a back and forth between early music and contemporary works, the latter were written in a style that was perfectly accessible to the audience, sounding just a little more modern than the masters of the past. Indeed the program was very much in line with the work of the ensemble, which readily visits all periods of music history. Placed around sacred major works, those being the two Masses for four voices of Tallis and Byrd – the "pièces de resistance" of the program, the smaller pleasurable and playful selections were also offered, such as a Christmas song presented as an encore at the end of the concert.

A little more daring?

Paradoxically, it was during the encore that singers used more color and diversity in their sound. The listener might have regretted this; although the singers have solid techniques and a beautiful style, they did not risk more contrast and variety of vocal colors or dynamics in the noble and beautiful music of Byrd and Tallis.

Sometimes, but rarely, the four voices let the emotion and excitement take precedence over their complete control of the situation... and it was so beautiful. This was evident particularly during the "Credo" of the Byrd Mass with the passage "et ascendit in coelum." Here, they performed with full voices, and then in the following measures they were infinitely sweet and caressing. They took the same soft approach to passages of the "Sanctus" of the same work. They let go in a similar way during the brief and richly elaborate "Amen" concluding the "Credo" of the Tallis Mass.

What would it take for the group to increase these moments when an excellent musical interpretation is transformed into inspirational delivery? They have the ability, but we wish that they would have more desire...

Ancient polyphony and new technology

"With an irresistible combination of informality and "Made in the USA" professionalism that one joyfully finds in many American artists, Christopher Dylan Herbert addressed the audience in delicious French to introduce the encores.

After having assured us that he and his fellow performers greatly enjoyed singing in France (this was their second French appearance), the baritone, with the natural stage presence of a movie star, humorously discussed New York Polyphony's CDs without forgetting to announce their latest release, an anthology of Christmas carols...

Then, affirming the modernity of the quartet that interprets the music of yesteryear but uses today's technologies, the seductive baritone kindly encouraged all who wish to visit the Facebook page and Twitter account of New York Polyphony: "if you tweet us, we will tweet you back," he promised!

Thunderous applause and a standing ovation greeted the close of the performance of these excellent and equally communicative singers...

NEW YORK POLYPHONY

Early music. Modern sensibility.



The Kansas City Star

New York Polyphony presents beautiful, authentic renditions from the Spanish Renaissance

Libby Hanssen | January 31, 2016

With clarity and immersive sonorities, New York Polyphony reminded the audience of music's spiritual function in the 15th century, as well as its sublime beauty.

This male a cappella quartet (countertenor Geoffrey Williams, tenor Steven Caldicott Wilson, baritone Christopher Dylan Herbert and bass Craig Phillips) is nearing its 10th anniversary as an ensemble, 10 years of exploring and promoting the succinct authenticity and blend of pure voice in both ancient and contemporary settings as performers and scholars.

Presented by the Friends of Chamber Music, Saturday evening's concert was in the appropriately spiritual and acoustic setting of the Grace & Holy Trinity Cathedral. The concert, "The Reign and Radiance of Spain," included pieces by both well- and little-known Spanish Renaissance composers in primarily sacred works.

Opening with Francisco Guerrero's "Regina caeli," the four displayed their richly soaring, dedicated style, generating a startling push when the antiphonal writing resolved into unison "alleluia."

The remainder of the concert's first half was presented without pause, combining secular motets and Tomás Luis de Victoria's "Missa 'O quam gloriosum,'" a varied work with enticing moments: a staggered descending line topped with a gorgeous countertenor line in the Kyrie, a stentorian bass entrance on the Credo, the changing texture of the Sanctus and its sudden "Hosannas!"

These portions from the Ordinary of the Mass were divided by the secular love song "Quae est ista/Sugepropera" by Guerrero, its flowing melismas bursting with energy as the text requests, "rise up, my love."

The first half concluded with Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's "Gaudent in caelis," which joyfully followed the plaintive calm of the Mass' Agnus Dei with its lively, expressive text painting.

New York Polyphony devoted the second half of the concert to works by Francisco de Peñalosa, recovered by musicologist Jane Morlet Hardie. Using her modern transcriptions, the ensemble this summer presented the first performance of Peñalosa's "Lamentations of Jeremiah" heard in several hundred years.

The work featured sections of morphing lines of incredible depth, an expansive stillness to the flow of text and lingering cadences. Each section began with an extended treatment on a Hebrew letter (Aleph, Beth, Gimel) to both set up and separate texts, leading the audience into contemplative reverie.

An encore from early American heritage concluded the concert, featuring the sweet tones of tenor Wilson in "Sweet Hour of Prayer," its triple time pulse in contrast to the more fluid pace of the previous works.



Gramophone

New works woven among Masses for troubled times

Laurence Vittes | December 2013

Taking their theme from the 16th-century Roman Catholic martyr Robert Southwell's realist poem, New York Polyphony weave a complex, clear-eyed yet still painfully beautiful tapestry of 15th- and 16th century Masses. Interwoven with brief, surprisingly compatible interludes by Richard Rodney Bennett, Andrew Smith and Gabriel Jackson, each composed in 2012 for the ensemble, the music vividly reflects what remains the universal confrontation between religious faith and political torment (Southwell, who was canonised by Pope Paul VI in 1970, had suffered drawing and quartering for refusing to abandon his religion after Henry VIII's suppression of the monasteries).

Perhaps because of its rarity (this is only its second available recording), John Plummer's *Missa sine nomine*, written in the previous century when Catholicism in England was still in bloom, stands out for its free response; in fact, it has much in common with the 21st-century contributions, most notably Jackson's *Ite missa est*, which effectively tempers its central spirituality with angular dialogues to bring the programme to a bracing conclusion. For listeners accustomed to the more ecstatic choral visions of groups such as the Oxford Camerata and Tallis Scholars, New York Polyphony's four members capture the ecclesiastical and musical impact on a more down-to-earth, personal level which benefits tremendously from BIS's audiophile sound, recorded in one of the label's favourite venues, Länna Church in Sweden. And while the conventional stereo playback is impressive, highlighted by bass Craig Phillips's opening lines in Plummer's *Gloria* and *Credo*, there is added dimensionality and tangible bloom in its SACD surround-sound configuration.



San Francisco Chronicle

CD review: New York Polyphony, 'Times go by Turns'

Joshua Kosman | November 7, 2013

For a demonstration of how sumptuously beautiful the music of the English Renaissance can sound, you could scarcely do better than this superb new release by the vocal quartet New York Polyphony. The main offerings are the four-voice mass settings of William Byrd and Thomas Tallis, along with a quite different three-voice setting by their little-known predecessor John Plummer, and all three are executed with a powerful combination of fluency and rhythmic solidity. For Byrd and Tallis, writing in the 16th century, setting the Catholic liturgy was a political as well as an artistic undertaking, either in support of the reigning monarchy or dangerously in opposition; yet the music itself is almost heedlessly lavish in its expansiveness and serenity. Plummer's music, earlier by nearly a century, has a lean and hungry edge in contrast. But the ensemble delivers all three works with urgency and rhetorical flair. Interspersed among the mass settings are short tidbits by contemporary composers Andrew Smith and Gabriel Jackson, as well as a gorgeous burst of chordal writing by the late Richard Rodney Bennett.



The San Diego Story

New York Polyphony Brings the “Missa Charles Darwin” to La Jolla

Ken Herman | November 2, 2013

Sometimes you choose to attend a concert on a hunch. When I decided to take in the La Jolla Athenaeum’s concert featuring New York Polyphony, it was because the publicity touted an unlikely piece entitled “Missa Charles Darwin.” Not something a critic runs across every day.

But once I heard New York Polyphony sing, I was as ecstatic as I was a number of years ago on a New York City visit when I chose to take a long subway ride to the Brooklyn Academy of Music on a freezing February day to hear an obscure Handel opera, only to discover the lead singer was the brilliant coloratura mezzo Joyce DiDonato. New York Polyphony, a quartet of four virtuoso male singers, upturned every assumption we hold about what voices do in concert. They are unlike either a small choir or a barbershop quartet, but more like a vocal string quartet, with each voice carrying its own independent yet interlocking part. In most ensemble vocal music—choirs especially—we cherish the ideal that blends all voices into a single sonority. With New York Polyphony, the individual character of each voice, the way each singer shaped and colored a phrase gave the ensemble its vibrant vitality and its identity. Overall, their voices were beautifully balanced, but what each voice accomplished individually in performance was indeed mesmerizing.

In his “Missa Charles Darwin,” the young American composer Gregory Brown employed texts from the writings of Charles Darwin, recreating the Sunday liturgy of the Christian Church as a seven-movement a cappella work that interprets each stage of that liturgy in terms of Darwin’s scientific observations about nature and evolution. While Brown included a few texts from the actual Mass, including the entire Kyrie in Greek, a musicologist would say that, textually, Brown’s trope has overtaken the Mass.

Brown’s musical diom is striking, honoring the hallowed conventions of liturgical polyphony with consistently elegant counterpoint and energizing his spare modal textures with just enough dissonance to keep the listener’s attention engaged. In the way that Arvo Pärt’s choral music alludes to late medieval harmonic practice without falling into mere pastiche, so Brown evokes the complex counterpoint of the early Renaissance master Josquin des Prez, yet always manages to cadence in the present century.

I found the tone of Brown’s Missa to be reverent and his parallels thought-provoking. For instance, in the Sanctus, that part of the Mass that expresses profound wonder and solemnity, Brown lifted up the fecundity of the “Great Tree of Life” in a brilliant effusion of vocal fanfares. In his “Alleluia” trope, however, he intensified his harmonic dissonance to set the words, “But if we admit a first cause, the mind still craves to know whence it came and how it arose.” This is as close to polemical as Brown ventured, although I shudder to think what the commentators on Fox News would make of a Mass reconstituted according to the precepts of science and natural selection.

As spokesman for New York Polyphony, bass Craig Phillips expressed the ensemble’s delight to be able to sing the “Missa Charles Darwin” in a library surrounded by books, a veritable temple of learning. The quartet followed the “Missa Charles Darwin” with Brown’s settings of three American Protestant hymns in austere yet textually sensitive arrangements. In festivals and music conventions over the last two decades, I have heard a surfeit of contemporary

sacred music, and no composer has impressed me more than Gregory Brown. A smart publishing house should toss him a hefty retainer and sign him up to a very long contract.

Balancing Brown's music with Thomas Tallis' gem "Mass for Four Voices" was more than a smart programming notion. It allowed New York Polyphony to demonstrate their prowess singing Renaissance music and at the same time show how different their take on this genre is. The prevalent understanding of sacred choral music—even in most small early music ensembles—is an ascetic restraint that subsumes the individual voice and personality into the purity of the ensemble.

What made New York Polyphony's Tallis exciting was their infusing each line with the singer's individual color and accentuation, and their diction and intonation were nothing less than impeccable. Their textures were far livelier than what passes in most circles today as proper sacred music, even though the latter aesthetic comes from the mid-19th century and not the Renaissance! New York Polyphony's Tallis Mass is available on their recent recording (along with the even more amazing William Byrd "Mass for Four Voices") on the excellent Swedish label Bis (BIS – 2037).

Two contemporary works flanked the Tallis, Andrew Smith's "Kyrie Cunctipotens Genitor Deus," a smart, neo-medieval work written for the quartet to open the Mass, and Gabriel Jackson's "Ite missa est" to close the Mass. More ostentatiously contemporary in style, Jackson's congenial piece was filled with clever, animated rhythmic riffs.

I liked Countertenor Geoffrey Williams' substantial vocal color, and its silvery edge surfed above the lower voices comfortably. Baritone Christopher Herbert struck me as the most dramatic of the singers, and his energy often drove the ensemble in a felicitous fashion. Phillips' bass proved majestically clear even in the deepest regions—he supported New York Polyphony just as an excellent cellist undergirds every successful string quartet. I admired tenor Steven Wilson's focus and supple phrasing, but a richer color was the only aspect that kept them from the pinnacle of sonic perfection.



Musical Toronto

English Renaissance masters all aglow again thanks to New York Polyphony

John Terauds | September 17, 2013

After basking in the glories of their latest album, *Times go by Turns*, it's clear that New York Polyphony has cemented a place as the a cappella classical vocal quartet of the moment.

Countertenor Geoffrey Williams, tenor Steven Caldicott Wilson, baritone Christopher Dylan Herbert and bass Craig Phillips have mastered the delicate art of singing pre-18th century music — while also being conscious of drawing clear lines to the 21st century.

In their new album, released on the BIS label, New York Polyphony has focused on a mix of masterpieces and lesser-known sacred works from 16th century England, a place deeply disturbed by the tug of war between Tudor Protestantism and traditional Roman Catholicism.

This period marks the height of polyphony, where three or more voices sing independent musical lines to create rich vocal tapestries. It also marks the beginning of a more straightforward, metrical style of music favoured by the Protestants.

The two masterworks on the album are *Masses for Four Voices* by William Byrd (1540-1623), who received special dispensation from Elizabeth I to write music suitable for Roman worship, and Thomas Tallis (1505-85), a master operator who survived the shifting tastes, politics and caprices of royal chapels under four monarchs.

The New Yorkers follow the best tradition in singing this music, achieving an absolutely equal balance between the four voices and singing without dynamics. (Few people not intimate with this music realise that the crescendos and decrescendos are contained within the writing itself, not in the singers raising or lowering the volume of their voices.)

The Aha! discovery on this album is a Mass setting by John Plummer (1410-83), whose life's work was largely destroyed when King Henry VIII ordered the dissolution (and, often, destruction) of his kingdom's Roman Catholic institutions. The music we get here is a rich blend of Medieval and Renaissance, balancing both a plainchant-like spareness and richer polyphony.

New York Polyphony always adds something newly composed to their programming.

On this disc, they have included the beautifully serene *A Colloquy With God*, based on a poem by 17th century poet Thomas Browne. It was a gift to the ensemble by the British composer Richard Rodney Bennett shortly before he died last Christmas Eve. He had been inspired by hearing them in concert.

The album closes with what can only be described as an elaborate vocal fanfare, written to deliberately echo the great polyphonists: *Ite Missa est* (The Mass is Ended) by another British composer, Gabriel Jackson.

Beauty, texture and variety are all present here. I can't think of a better introduction to the vocal glories of the English Renaissance.

A promotional image for New York Polyphony featuring four men in dark suits and ties against a pink background. The text 'NEW YORK POLYPHONY' is written in white, with the tagline 'Early music. Modern sensibility.' below it.

NEW YORK POLYPHONY

Early music. Modern sensibility.

Audiophile Audition

New York Polyphony continues to claim a spot as one of the finest small vocal groups performing today.

Steve Ritter | September 16, 2013

New York Polyphony sounds larger than they are. These four guys know how to project their sound, and it's not just the way they are recorded. Though I have no doubt that the Länna Church in Sweden has marvelous acoustics, the fullness of this ensemble's projection goes way beyond mere control board techniques. The music helps as well; the three mass settings by Roman Catholic composers caught in the midst of personal recusancy had to dance on a fine line between imperial favor—and indeed, life itself—and their own loyalties to the church. Each of these works, performed in what could only be called inadequate settings at best, might have been done by a quartet of people. Elizabeth's reign tolerated, barely, the recusants, but they could not make a big splash about it, and the last thing she would have wanted was to see or hear was large, elaborate mass settings proclaiming the very doctrines she swore to suppress.

So the works by Plummer, Byrd, and Tallis, are scaled-down in context but hardly in quality. John Plummer actually had it the easiest—he flourished during the reign of Henry VI, and was known throughout the continent. The winds of change were only beginning to blow through his life in his last years when the House of Tudor began its accession, but the Reformation destroyed virtually all of his admittedly vigorous and eccentric music. If not for his popularity outside of England we may not have any of his extant works. His three-part Mass is an exploration of challenging harmonies and almost jarring rhythms.

William Byrd was caught in the fire a number of times, and this Mass displays his unique and unflagging ability to put heart and soul into every line of notes he writes. Byrd was fined a number of times during his life but always evaded ultimate persecution, though he was friends with many who were not so lucky. He was placed on the “search” list of recusant active Catholics several times, was accused of involvement in what could have been treasonable activities, but escaped this possibly because of the Queen's own respect for his music. In fact, she granted him lands toward the end of his life after he petitioned the court because of the failure of a noted music publication series.

Tallis is of course the high priest of the English Renaissance. He served four different monarchs and skillfully trod the way of languages, liturgy, and style. But his commitment to the recusant cause was never in doubt. This Mass is nearly syllabic, saving counterpoint for special moments and used only sparingly, making it, as the notes call it, “Catholic in intent and Anglican in execution.” This beautiful work is a good introduction to the composer for those who don't know him.

The main pieces are interspersed among three shorter modern works of varying interest. Perhaps the best is the Bennett A Colloquy with God, a piece the composer gifted to New York Polyphony after hearing them perform in 2012, to a setting by Sir. Thomas Brown. It's a lovely, lyrical piece that works well coming after the Byrd. Andrew Smith wrote his Kyrie: Cunctipotens Genitor Deus specifically for this recording and it sounds more like the Renaissance pieces than anything modern. The same can't be said for Gabriel Jackson's *Ite missa est*, with his always distinctive yet highly-evocative and colorful religious music. This particular piece is fine, but rather inconsequential in the vast universe of the rest of his catalog. Another fine album from New York Polyphony, cradled in Bis's marvelous surround acoustics.



NPR Deceptive Cadence

Watch A Late Composer's Parting Statement, Through The Eyes Of A Child

Anastasia Tsioulcas | September 5, 2013

The vocal quartet New York Polyphony delights in surprises — whether it's a matter of singing some rather raunchy Italian madrigals or making a video to introduce their album *Times Go By Turns* (released on BIS Aug. 27). The piece that the foursome of countertenor Geoffrey Williams, tenor Steven Caldicott Wilson, baritone Christopher Dylan Herbert and bass Craig Phillips selected for their video, "A Colloquy with God" by English composer Richard Rodney Bennett, has a very particular — and haunting — story behind it.

"We loved Sir Richard's work," Phillips says. "We always wanted to work with him, but we never had the nerve to ask. But we invited him to come hear us sing at Miller Theatre here in New York in January 2012, and he came. He was very kind and offered to work with us."

As pleased as they were, the quartet was astonished by what happened next. "Two days later," Phillips says, "a scan of a handwritten score arrived in our email inbox."

After premiering the work in Canada, the group planned to give the incandescently beautiful "Colloquy" its American premiere in New York in January of this year with the New York-based composer in attendance. They never had the chance: Bennett died Christmas Eve 2012 at age 76. "Colloquy" was one of Bennett's last works, if not the last.

The group decided that they needed to find an innovative way to introduce "Colloquy," and thought that a video, which is still a rare medium for classical music, would be a fitting tribute. But with the piece's already elegiac text — taken from "Evening Hymn" by the 17th-century author Sir Thomas Browne — the quartet, Phillips says, was concerned that in the wake of Bennett's death, the result "might be something exploitative, or sentimental, or obvious."

"We wanted something iconic but definitely not narrative — something more like an art installation," Phillips continues. So they turned to the director, filmmaker, designer and choreographer Mark DeChiazza, whom they had met while collaborating on a pair of operas by Jonathan Berger at Stanford University. Phillips says, "We gave Mark complete artistic control and said 'Here, go.'"

The young boy who is the heart of this video turns the text's meaning around. "In the best way possible, it was not at all what we were expecting," Phillips says.

"When New York Polyphony called me to discuss creating imagery for 'A Colloquy with God,' just two days had passed since the death of my uncle," DeChiazza explains by email. "Beside his deathbed, witnessing his efforts to cross that last line, the visceral process of his reckoning with death had struck me as frightening, yet also profound and pure — at once alien and completely ordinary. My experience of his death, still very vivid, shaped the way I heard Bennett's song, which discovers the lyric beauty in a man's mortal struggle. It also led me to understand the text — Browne's poem — as a grappling with opposites and dualities that, if brought into harmony, might ultimately transmute death into an eternal awakening."

DeChiazza's experience of the music, he says, is how he came to focus on a young boy: "It felt significant to me that Bennett shares 'A Colloquy with God' equally between the four voices of New York Polyphony, with no one voice featured; he does not ascribe singular identity to the singer of Browne's prayer. In response, I made the video's subject a young boy, feeling congruence in how the life force of a child can present with an abstract clarity — without carrying too strong an imprint of history or context. This child exists within a closed, blank room, which contains a sense of waiting or imminence. The bed becomes a place of unending restlessness, host to the contradictions of falling and flying, danger and safety, void and light. And I had great collaborators: in New York Polyphony's musicians, who led me through the depth of their interpretation of the music; in Mark Andrew, my director of photography, who brought his uncanny eye to the imagery; and in Harper Altschul, who reveals to the camera a truth and maturity far beyond his 7 years."

NEW YORK POLYPHONY

Early music. Modern sensibility.



Classics Today

New York Polyphony-And Homophony, From Tallis to Today

David Vernier | September 2013

In the years when the four women of Anonymous 4 were regularly recording, you looked forward to each new release, knowing that they would consistently offer first-rate performances and thoughtful, enlightening programs. So far, the four men of New York Polyphony have maintained a similar standard of world-class performance and engaging programming. You may not think the world yearns for another Byrd 4-part Mass recording—that is, until you hear these four male voices sing it. Sure, you’ve heard the Tallis Scholars’ reference version, but have you ever heard it performed by just four voices, ideally matched, of uniquely compatible timbre, combined into such a richly resonant sound? Not to mention the nuances of phrasing, of breathing, of inflection obtainable only by small ensembles whose members are closely bonded personally and are musically of one mind. It’s sung a major-third down from its usual key, and although generally taken at a slightly faster pace than we’re used to (the Agnus Dei a bit too fast to wrench its full emotional impact), in this decidedly non-liturgical context you appreciate the purposeful flow and momentum.

The “early music” part of the program also includes two rarely-heard but eminently worthy works, the *Missa sine nomine* by English composer John Plummer (1410-1483) and Thomas Tallis’ *Mass for Four Voices*. The latter, minus a *Kyrie*, features some of the most gorgeous passages of pure homophony you will hear, sparingly interspersed with polyphonic sections. Here, you really appreciate the vibrant quality of this quartet’s sound, as well as the effect on the ear of such impeccably tuned chords.

Modern works by Richard Rodney Bennett (*A Colloquy with God*), Andrew Smith (*Kyrie: Cunctipotens Genitor Deus*), and Gabriel Jackson (*Ite missa est*) fit perfectly, not just because of their texts, but because of their basic musical compatibility with the older works—set in a modern-tonal structure that respects the sacred-spiritual context. All three of these pieces were written for New York Polyphony; Jackson’s jaunty, jazzy *Ite missa est* is an ingeniously written little gem, a program-ending highlight that shows off the composer’s affecting harmonic concept and inventive rhythmic textual treatment along with the singers’ most delicate ensemble virtuosity. The sound on this SACD recording, from a Swedish church, is consistent with BIS’s usual high standard. Recommended with the assurance that you will listen to this disc often.

NEW YORK POLYPHONY

Early music. Modern sensibility.



Gramophone

Review: EndBeginning

Fabrice Fitch | August 2012

Having been more than usually critical of this all-male vocal quartet's previous offering (*Avie*, 8/10), it's good to report positively on this one, of which the centrepiece is an involving reading of Brumel's Requiem. On *The Clerks'* recording of 2005, where it was paired with La Rue's setting, the work seemed to me the less distinctive of the two. But if the new recording hasn't quite changed my mind, it's convinced me that my previous judgment of it was unduly harsh. The only possible miscalculations in an otherwise assured performance are the overly jaunty delivery of the verse in the Introit and the parallel organum used in sections of the concluding plainsong *Libera me*: I think it unlikely, even in a Requiem service, that late-15th-century 'singing on the book' (as improvising on plainsong was called) would have been quite so...plain.

Much of the remaining music (*Lamentations* by Crecquillon and an impressive motet on the same theme by Clemens non Papa) was new to me. Though the approach is hardly revolutionary (whether knowingly or otherwise, their reading of the famous *Absalon fili mi* is nearly identical to the Hilliard Ensemble's nearly 30 years ago), New York Polyphony have well-matched voices, unanimity of purpose and a far surer touch artistically than before. The contemporary piece that concludes the recital left me unmoved, however, its treatment of Machaut's most famous ballade overly reverential in several senses. An uncertain end, perhaps, to a new beginning?

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Classics Today

Review: EndBeginning

David Vernier | August 2012

Four years ago, I last wrote about New York Polyphony, the male vocal quartet who here makes its debut on BIS. The recording was a Christmas program and included the following description: "...these are ideally matched, sensitively balanced voices, warm yet vibrant in the tradition of groups such as the Hilliard Ensemble. And the singing is impeccable—the breathing, the phrasing, all of the ensemble work shows musicians at one with each other and with the music at hand. (Type New York Polyphony in Search Reviews to read the entire review.)

There's really nothing new to add to that, except perhaps that in the last few years the ensemble has developed even more refined soft singing and—if it's possible—a more vibrant resonance when they want to emphasize a particularly rich harmonic moment or passage. The fact is, however closely you want to analyze the sound and the performance, you'll find nothing but reasons to keep listening—and plenty to support an argument for New York Polyphony's preeminence among today's male vocal ensembles.

This program of mostly 16th-century works from Franco-Flemish composers suits these voices especially well—for me the expressive range and vocal ensemble technique displayed in Clemens' *Tristitia obsedit me* was a highlight (not to mention the gorgeous music itself), along with Josquin's *Absalon fili mi*. American composer Jackson Hill (b. 1941) wrote *Ma fin est mon commencement* for New York Polyphony, and it's described as "a fantasy on Machaut's original"; but whether or not you are familiar with that work, the undulating lines, close-textured, modern/ancient harmonic structure, and the phrases that build purposefully to several climactic points—and fully exploiting that vibrant resonance mentioned above—will keep your full attention while leaving no doubt as to this modern (2009) work's rightful place on the program. This superb BIS production, ideally recorded in a Swedish church, bodes well for what looks like the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

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NPR

New York Polyphony: A Vocal Quartet Takes On Death

Anastasia Tsioulcas | February 21, 2012

It's been about three decades since pre-Baroque music began to be revived in a big way. A whole constellation of big-name vocal superstars has evolved, with Anonymous 4, The Tallis Scholars and the late Montserrat Figueras among the firmament. But now a new generation of early music experts has come of age — and their numbers include the vocal quartet New York Polyphony, traveling with the tag line "Early music. Modern sensibility."

Marrying new technology to music is a particular passion for this group (countertenor Geoffrey Williams, baritone Christopher Dylan Herbert, bass Craig Phillips and, on this recording, tenor Geoffrey Silver, who has since left and been replaced with Steven Caldicott Wilson, pictured above). They've positioned themselves as a kind of a cappella Kronos Quartet eager to push the boundaries of the expected, from their performance of a Missa Charles Darwin by Gregory Brown at TedX Woods Hole to an animated video they created for music by the largely forgotten 15th-century composer Lionel Power.

There are dozens (and frankly probably hundreds) of excellent recordings in the catalogue that revolve around two staple subjects: romantic love and religious devotion. But for their latest album, New York Polyphony turned to matters that feel far more pressing in our own turbulent and too often violent era: death, loss and the sobering prospect of having to face one's own mortality.

To this end, the group assembled music mostly from Franco-Flemish composers from the first half of the 16th century. That sounds rather dry, until one takes into account what a hideously violent and uncertain era it was — one bedeviled by warfare, religious persecution, famine and plague. As the text of the affecting work attributed to Josquin Desprez included here, *Abasalon Fili Mi*, an exquisitely somber musical portrait of Biblical fathers mourning their dead sons, has it: "I shall live no longer/but descend weeping into hell."

Equally affecting are Antoine Brumel's Mass for the dead (*Missa Pro Defunctis*), one of the earliest polyphonic settings of the memorial mass, two Gregorian plainsongs, the little-known Flemish composer Thomas Crecquillon's setting of lamentations from the biblical Book of Jeremiah and a haunting motet full of strange harmonies by the Dutch composer Jacobus Clemens non Papa — all sung with pinpoint accuracy, flexibility and an amber-shaded richness and depth. Not unlike their British counterparts in the larger vocal ensemble *Stile Antico*, New York Polyphony brings a very human (and very welcome) warmth to their singing.

True to New York Polyphony's inquisitive spirit, the album closes with a contemporary piece by Jackson Hill (b. 1941), an Alabama native and longtime Bucknell University professor who looked back seven centuries for inspiration. Taking fragments from a 14th-century piece by one of France's great poets and composers, Guillaume de Machaut, Hill created a work that rises and sighs in hypnotic undulations of sound — providing an affecting close to this gorgeous and reflective program.

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The Denver Post

All-male vocal quartet simply exquisite

Kyle MacMillan | November 5, 2010

In a music world that seems ever more amplified, digitized and engineered, it is not surprising that there is a growing hunger for an antidote: something natural, direct and sure.

Perfectly filling the bill is New York Polyphony, an all-male vocal quartet that relies solely on the human voice — simple, unfiltered and unenhanced.

Ahhhhh.

The 4-year-old group made a welcome encore appearance Friday evening at St. John's Episcopal Cathedral.

Most of the repertoire was unfamiliar, and that was the point. New York Polyphony likes to take its listeners to musical realms far from what they typically hear on the radio or at the local symphony hall.

It specializes in works from the Middle Ages and Renaissance, throwing in some contemporary music along the way. The early-music realm has long been dominated by European groups, but this Yankee foursome (one member is English) more than holds its own.

Most of the program was devoted to eight selections from its latest album, "Tudor City." As the title suggests, many fell within the Tudor era — 1485 to 1603, but some date back to a century or more earlier and two are recent works by Andrew Smith.

It was extraordinary how past and present blurred. The new sounded old, and the old sounded strikingly fresh and immediate.

The four singers perform with exquisite blend, spot-on intonation and penetrating blend. Each is a first-rate singer, but Craig Phillips with his plush bass and Geoffrey Williams with his light countertenor especially stood out.

By switching places or dropping to a trio at times, the quartet constantly effected subtle changes in sound. Attendees all probably had their own favorites, but it was hard to top William Cornysh's rhythmically varied "Ave Maria Mater Dei" or Walter Lambe's intricate "Stella caeli."

In the second half, the quartet had fun with French Renaissance composer Clement Janequin's programmatic chanson, "La guerre (La bataille de Marignan)," which chronicles a famous battle, complete with light-hearted sound effects.

New York Polyphony will perform at 3:30 p.m. Sunday at the cathedral as part of a free requiem service that will include Antoine Brumel's "Missa pro defunctis."