



Plaine & Easie blend beautifully

Early music quartet is compelling, genuine

By Elaine Schmidt, Special to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Feb. 14, 2011

It's hard to imagine a better matched group of early musicians than the four-person ensemble Plaine & Easie.

The Seattle-based group, composed of soprano Linda Tsatsanis, violinist Shulamit Kleinerman, bass violinist Nathan Whittaker and lutenist John Lenti, played to a full house at the Cathedral Church of All Saints Saturday evening in the Early Music Now series.

Formed to compete for the 2009 Early Music America Unicorn Prize, the group of friends and colleagues won the competition and, in the process, a national audience for their Renaissance music.

They perform with a tremendously unified approach to their polyphonic songs, playing off each others' ideas and nuances and capturing the distinct character of each piece they touch. Their takes on playful, flirtatious tunes, high-spirited dances and melancholy, dolorous laments are all equally genuine and compelling.

Soprano Tsatsanis takes the proverbial spotlight in the group's vocal numbers with a big, colorful, highly refined sound and spot-on musical sense and nuance. She is dramatic in her deliveries, bringing the text to life with dynamics, ornaments, artful use of vibrato and a constant connection with her audience. The woman speaks volumes with a single arpeggio.

Kleinerman, Whittaker and Lenti are not merely a back-up band. They are clearly equal partners in the ensemble, each of them bringing exceptional style and technique to the table as well as an unflinching sense of ensemble and often a spirit of fun.

From Lenti one heard moments of precise, delicate finger work, fast, intricate passages, and some fiery playing that can best be described as early Flamenco for lute.

Kleinerman, playing in an off-the-shoulder style that finds the violin resting against her chest and upper arm rather than tucked under her chin, moved from moments of light, sans-vibrato playing to bits that sounded a great deal like Celtic fiddle, and others that were clearly precursors to "old-time" fiddle.

Whittaker plays the bass violin (an early cousin of the cello with an extra string and a wooden peg) with a sound that combines the warmth and expressiveness of a fine bass-baritone with the earthy sound of gut strings, making the instrument sing.

Repeated climate-induced tuning and a broken-lute-string delay at intermission didn't dim the evening's experience.