

VOCES 8

By Michael Huebner

The English choral tradition, its repertoire steeped in history yet remaining true to present-day innovation, has received a fair amount of airplay in Birmingham in recent years. Performances by groups such as the Tallis Scholars, the King's Singers, the Orlando Consort and Tenebrae come to mind, the more pop-oriented Swingle Singers (founded by Mobile native Ward Swingle) adding a more stylish dimension.

On Tuesday, the London-based octet VOCES8 paid a return visit to Samford University (it has sung there twice before), bringing centuries of vocal music alive with perfectly matched a cappella vocals and not a note out of place, while getting close to the audience with their engaging personalities and spoken program notes.

Much of the program, titled "Light Divine," came from the Elizabethan era – William Byrd and Thomas Tallis from England, Monteverdi and Giovanni Gabrieli from Italy. To put it in perspective, Mendelssohn, Rachmaninoff and Arvo Pärt were added to the mix. During the course of the 100-minute show (including the interval), the eight singers – two women and six men – sang in four languages.

Two works by Byrd, a Latin motet and English anthem, opened the concert, giving first notice of the group's non-vibrato purity, a standard for groups with period performance leanings. It remained constant, at least until the final encore, a



tongue-in-cheek opera medley. Two German works, one by Mendelssohn, another an arrangement of a folk song, had them singing in another vernacular while deftly negotiating a web of thick harmonies and broad dynamic range. Church

Slavonic was represented by two settings of "Bogoroditse Devo," one a prayer that basked in the rich harmonic fabric and deep bass of Rachmaninoff's "Vespers," the other a livelier, more celebrative version by Estonian composer Arvo Pärt.

Two settings of "Te Lucis Ante Terminum" revealed the spare reverence of Thomas Tallis. An arrangement of the Scottish folksong, "Waly, Waly" ("The Water is Wide") was a gentle reminiscence. Closing offerings were the spiritual "Were You There" and Kate Rusby's "Underneath the Stars."

VOCES8's broad appeal, stemming from its beginnings 11 years ago, lies with its range of repertoire. For early music enthusiasts, the ensemble's sparkling clarity and revitalization of 400-year repertoire is refreshing. For general choral enthusiasts, it excels in romantic and modern repertoire. Jazz and pop diversions take their programming a step further, as they did at this event.

Ben Folds' "The Luckiest," Nat "King" Cole's "Straighten Up and Fly Right," Jesse J's "Price Tag," Harold Arlen's "I've Got the World on a String" and Duke Ellington's "It Don't Mean a Thing" were each given equal amounts of focus and razor-sharp precision as Rachmaninoff or an Elizabethan motet. It was an indication that these are timeless musicians, truly dedicated to their art.

VOCES 8

Sam Dressel, tenor
Paul Smith, baritone
Andrea Haines, soprano
Jonathan Pacey, bass
Chris Wardle, countertenor
Oliver Vincent, tenor
Emily Dickens, soprano
Barnaby Smith, countertenor

Brock Recital Hall
Tuesday, March 8, 2016
Co-presented by Birmingham Chamber Music Society and Davis Architects Guest Artist Series.