

Music: Christmas Mass

Renaissance Chorus Observes the Season With Concert of Early Church Music

By ERIC SALZMAN

THE Renaissance Chorus of New York marked this holiday week-end with a rather special re-creation of the Christmas of another day.

This capable and musical group, under the knowing guidance of Harold Brown, built a program around the musical part of a Christmas mass as set by composers of the Renaissance. The concert was given Saturday night at Carnegie Recital Hall and was listed for a repetition there at midnight yesterday.

The ordinary of the mass was the *Missa de Beata of Virgine* by Heinrich Finck. This was surrounded by the appropriate Introit, Gradual, Alleluia, Offertory and Communion, the Offertory in a setting by Orlando di Lasso, the others by William Byrd. And then there were seasonal hymns or motets by Hans Leo Hassler, Gaspar van Weerbeke, Ockeghem and Palestrina, as well as a medieval Gregorian Trope.

All this constituted not a real duplication of any actual mass that could have been heard during the period but a suggestion of the kind of liturgical musical setting the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries used to celebrate the Nativity. It made an attractive and evocative evening.

Among the many beauties

of this music, the centerpiece—the Finck Mass—was particularly noteworthy. Finck seems to have been a kind of musical Durer. Although perhaps not as universal a figure as his great contemporary, Finck seems to have held a similar place of eminence in the musical world of his day. The Mass is a fascinating combination of archaic and Gothic traditions, with the fresh world of Renaissance art coming from Flanders and the south in the form of harmonic richness, as well as a new clarity and balance in structure and musical direction.

The Mass was performed with old instruments—a pair of sackbuts (early trombones), cornetto (a kind of cross between a trumpet and a clarinet), a viola and a 'cello. The singers seemed to be slightly intimidated by the instruments, possibly because they sometimes had their own versions of the pitch; also the three-part singing lies mostly in middle and low registers and these factors seemed occasionally to produce some slightly timid, tone singing.

This was especially noticeable because other parts of the Finck and most of the rest of the program were not only firm and substantial but also full of powerful, vital and expressive singing of a high order.

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