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Free-Spirited Invention With Instruments Centuries Old

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Early Music New York: From left, Vita Wallace; [Wayne Hankin playing two flutes](#); and Charles Weaver joined this ensemble for its annual Christmas program at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine

You can count on Frederick Renz and the musicians of his [Early Music New York](#) to offer a Christmas program unlike anything else the city's music world has to offer. Some years it is a theatrical piece, like Mr. Renz's reconstruction of the 12th-century "[Play of St. Nicholas](#)"; in others, like this one, it draws on rarely heard sacred works, carols and instrumental pieces from across Europe, presented in an orderly procession that traces changing approaches to the Christmas story and the evolution of Western harmonic and rhythmic practice.

This year's offering, heard on Christmas afternoon (the final performance was that evening) at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, was weighted toward medieval works. But there was also a fascinating Baroque coda in which lively Scottish and English songs framed a set of French vocal works, by Charpentier and Delalande, juxtaposed to create a traditional dance suite. Mr. Renz accomplished that feat, in one case, by fitting a sacred text to a gigue that originally accompanied a drinking song.

You had to admire the free-spirited inventiveness of Mr. Renz's solution, but he would be the first to tell you that bold as it may seem, now that composers' intentions are treated as sacrosanct, Baroque musicians did this kind of tweaking regularly.

Apart from overseeing the arrangements and writing the informative notes, though, Mr. Renz was an unseen force here. That makes sense: he is a keyboardist and conductor, and for most of the music in these concerts, those roles would have been anachronistic.

Instead, nine singers, one of whom was also in an instrumental trio, performed uncondacted but rich, thoroughly unified sound, particularly in a set of anonymous French works from the early 13th century — settings of "Beata viscera" and "Orientis partibus" — and a group of 14th- and 15th-century Czech and Polish works.

Striking, too, was the ensemble's expansive approach to "Angelus ad virginem," a song popular enough in 13th-century England to rate a mention in Chaucer. The song exists in a variety of settings, the earliest for a single voice, with two- and three-voice harmonized versions appearing in the 14th century. Here the group began with the monophonic version and added the second and third voices in the later verses.

The instrumental pieces, scattered through the program, were energetically played, and the ensemble was well balanced, with fine violin and vielle playing by Vita Wallace and agile lute and Baroque guitar accompaniments by Charles Weaver. The real star among the players, though, was Wayne Hankin, who played flutes — two at a time, in an anonymous Italian saltarello — reeds and the bagpipelike musette.