At Strathmore, Calmus Ensemble is stunning in its vocal variety, mastery

By Robert Battey

Last week, two of Germany’s best musical ensembles — one very large, one very small — visited our area. After the resplendence of the Dresden Staatskapelle on Tuesday at Strathmore, we were treated on Friday to an equally impressive display of precise, polished musicianship by the Calmus Ensemble, an a cappella vocal quintet from Leipzig.

Founded in 1999 by students at the St. Thomas Church choir school (which used to be run by a fellow named Bach), Calmus presented a program both narrow and wide: all German works, but spanning more than four centuries of repertoire. The group held the audience at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Alexandria nearly spellbound with its artistry.

The only possible quibble was that occasionally there was a very slight imbalance in the upper texture; Calmus has only one female member, the alto parts being taken by a countertenor who could not always match the clear projection of the soprano. But in matters of pitch, diction and musical shaping, I’ve never heard finer ensemble singing.

From the lively “Italian Madrigals” of Heinrich Schütz, to a setting by Johann Hiller of “Alles Fleisch” (used by Brahms centuries later in “Ein Deutsches Requiem”), to the numinous coloratura of Bach’s “Lobet den Herrn,” to some especially lovely part-songs of Schumann, to a performance-art work written for the group by Bernd Franke in 2010, the quintet met the demands of every piece with cool perfection. “Agnus Dei” and “Nachtlied” by Max Reger were startling: Nothing I’d previously heard by this dour, academic composer prepared me for the airy harmonies that could have come from Brian Wilson. When Calmus returns, which I hope is soon, it should be featured in one of the city’s marquee venues.