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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.**