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At Early Music Now concert, visitors from Leipzig delight

By Elaine Schmidt

Sometimes the whole really is greater than the sum of the parts.

Saturday's double-bill Early Music Now presentation of two exceptional early music ensembles, the Calmus Ensemble Leipzig vocal quintet and the QNG: Quartet Next Generation recorder quartet, was just such an equation.

Either of the groups, both hailing from Leipzig, Germany, would have been a musical treat as a single bill. Together they created musical magic and incredible variety, focusing largely on secular pieces of the 1500s.

Calmus, a male quartet plus female soprano, creates a flawlessly blended sound, relying not only seamlessly meshed vocal timbres but on ornaments placed with absolute precision across all five voices and on complete agreement on such details as judicious, sparing use of vibrato.

The singers bring tremendous character and musical depth to their interpretations, conveying the tone and meaning of lyrics in a fashion that transcends the language of the lyrics.

Calling QNG a quartet is only correct in the number of players that make up the group. There may be just four people involved, but it's hard to keep track of the number of recorders.

Moving continually through the recorder family, from a more-than-6-foot-long bass instrument to the tiny piccolino, they produce a perfectly blended sound.

They use articulation, dynamics, exquisitely executed ornaments and constant attention to colors within their sounds, as well as traditional and extended techniques, to create flowing music and produce effects ranging from bird songs to battle clatter.

The program featured a rarity for an early music concert in the world premiere of Paul Moravec's "Sacred Love Songs." Commissioned by the two ensembles, the piece is an absolute feast of five impeccably set, gorgeous melodies, each focusing on some aspect of love.

Featuring the two ensembles together and alone, the piece requires the recorder players to use modern instruments. Although these recorders look like their elder cousins, they employ a different overtone series, creating a sound more like organ pipes than period recorders.

The result on Saturday's program was the addition of yet another set of colors and harmonies to an already delightfully varied, captivating program.

The ensembles answered a standing ovation with an encore of Adolf Seifert and Max Reger's arrangement of "Der Mond ist aufgegangen," rearranged by German choral conductor Volker Hempfling.