PERFORMANCE

Profeti della Quinta:
this year's winners

YORK EARLY MUSIC INTERNATIONAL YOUNG ARTISTS COMPETITION

From the ten selected finalists, it was to be the Swiss-based male vocal quintet Profeti della Quinta who captured the unanimous decision of the distinguished jury to win this year's York Early Music International Young Artists Competition, held in St Margaret's Church in mid-July.

The voting members of the audience took a very different view in awarding their prize to the Belgian female vocal quartet Encantar, and provided a timely reminder that a few years ago it was the audience, and not the jury, who saw the potential of today's internationally acclaimed vocal ensemble Stile Antico.

In choosing Italian madrigals from the late 16th and early 17th centuries by Salamone Rossi and Cipriano de Rore, Profeti certainly played to its strengths, the music calling for a virtuoso countertenor with – in modern parlance – a quartet backing group. They were certainly well attuned to period style, sang with crisp diction and possess a brilliant solo singer who flew around the many decorative passages with consummate ease.

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I would have wanted to experience their singing of music that used all five singers with equal importance and where a musical blend was called for before passing judgment.

Appearing later, Encantar introduced their programme by making a point of stressing that the blending of voices had been the deciding factor when choosing their programme, eventually selecting music by seven composers from the 16th century. It was to include a very beautiful *Ave Maria* by Palestrina; a tender *Una hora* from Victoria and ending with Lambert de Sayve's *Quem vidistis pastores*.

Throughout they showed a high regard for intonation while shading the music with a far greater range of colours and dynamics than their male counterparts. Maybe the choreography will be something they can discard, but at least they looked towards a personal presentation.

The competition was to highlight the very divided approach that exists in early and baroque music: those looking to reach a wider audience by smoothing down the once fashionable pungencies, while others dig even deeper into 'authentic' period style.

It is down the smooth road that the Sebastian Camber Players are travelling, their presentation coming from the baroque era of Corelli and Francois Couperin. With two violins, cello and harpsichord, all having studied historical performance at New York's Juilliard School, they produced elegant string playing that was immaculate in tuning and balance, with bowing and intonation that was a lesson to other groups. They could well feel they had done more than enough to take the award.

At the other extreme the Habsburger Camerata, whose members come from Canada, the UK and the USA, are looking to take early music back to its roots, with a combination of violin, cornett, sackbut, viola da gamba and organ specialising in 17th-century music. The jury could only judge their playing on the day and they had some passing problems along the way. Still there was enough here for them to look forward to a sustained career.

For future years the competition must be far more stringent as to the music that is offered if it is to retain its place as an early music event, the performances of Beethoven and Hummel surely falling right outside permitted limits.

Yet it was Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* that provided the major work in the programme from a UK entrant, the Borromini String Quartet. How can the jury judge whether they are equally adept in early music when digging into Beethoven?

Equally the Den Haag Piano Quintet, based in the Netherlands, gave a delightful account of the 1802 Piano Quintet by Hummel, Tomoki Sumiya deserving an award for his double bass playing. But as this was their only offering how could their credentials be assessed?

David Denton