

Soprano Rosa Lamoreaux

"...whose silvery voice created reverent counterpoint to images of Notre Dame..."

...with Hesperus and silent film

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Hesperus accompanies 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame'

By Anne Midgette

The crowd at St. Mark's Episcopal Church on Saturday night had the air of a team of marathoners approaching the finish line. The Washington Early Music Festival held 32 events in June, many of them at the Capitol Hill church, and many of the same people, both participants and audience members, kept coming back. On Saturday, they were rewarded with an absolutely delightful finale that, in keeping with the spirit of this festival, mingled the small-scale, the didactic and the unusual.

The ensemble Hesperus has been a part of the Washington scene since 1979: a flexible group of musicians specializing in early music with, in recent years, a particular focus on accompanying silent films with live music from the period in which they were set. On Saturday, this meant a screening of the 1923 classic "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," the film that made Lon Chaney a star, to the strains of music by von Bingen, Machaut, Dufay and other composers — many of them French, active between the 12th and 15th centuries — so that the great crowd scenes of medieval fairs and street fights played out to raucous medieval dance music and songs.

Playing for an hour and a half without a break, in time (more or less) to the onscreen action, is an endurance feat

for musicians, and Hesperus's three performers pulled it off with energy and conviction. They prefaced their show with an engaging introduction to an array of instruments that looked as if it had been lifted from the pages of a medieval manuscript and, in at least one case, had been reproduced from one. Priscilla Smith manned a battery of winds including the shawm (an antecedent of the oboe) and the krummhorn (an antecedent, she said, of nothing, due to its limited range and absence of dynamic variety), and even an early bagpipe; Tina Chancey offered strings ranging from the *vielle*, a kind of cross between a guitar and a gamba, to the raspy *lyra*. **Both joined, when called for, in two- and three-part song with Rosa Lamoreaux, whose silvery voice created reverent counterpoint to images of Notre Dame and helped close the evening in a reverent canon over the image of the dying Quasimodo.**

The array of music was just as large: excerpts from 12th-century liturgical music, *rondeaux* by the 14th-century French composer Jehan de Lescurel, works by the 15th century's Guillaume Dufay. It was all played without a break, often linked by improvisatory passages, with particular pieces associated with different characters, and with sound effects when called for, from Quasimodo's bells to a hiss of



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tambourine at each appearance of the villain.

Medieval music is not perhaps the first accompaniment one might think of for this film, which, despite its medieval setting, is basically conceived along the lines of a 19th-century Italian opera: a missing link, indeed, between that form of popular entertainment and today's Hollywood films. When Esmeralda, eyes flashing, hurls out the word "Assassin!" at her tormentor, or when the half-crazy mother too late recognizes the Gypsy child she lost in infancy, opera fans will experience a flash of recognition; and a Puccini or Verdi could have had a field day with this story. But Hesperus made this carefully selected assortment of early works, the raucous dances and simple melodies, a very plausible alternative, especially to a film shown on a modestly sized screen at the front of the church. The performance showed scholarship well used in the service of artistry and fun, and gave the Washington Early Music Festival's die-hard audiences something to cheer about as they crossed the finish line.

Hesperus

will perform live accompaniment to the silent film "Robin Hood" at An die Musik in Baltimore on Friday at 8 p.m. 410-385-2638; andiemusiklive.com.

Rosa Lamoreaux
www.rosasings.com
www.Jwentworth.com