

Preview**Chagrin Valley Chamber Music Holiday Concert — something different, something to please everybody**

by Daniel Hathaway



When cellist and conductor Michael Gelfand first saw the proposed program for the Chagrin Valley Chamber Music Series Holiday Concert on December 15, he said to himself, "Woo — what have we got here?" After all, most holiday concerts follow a predictable pattern (CVCN, for example, normally performs Handel's *Messiah*). This one opens its arms wide enough to embrace both an aria from Bach's *Matthew Passion* and *Frosty the Snow Man*.

Credit that variety to the series's artistic director, violinist Hristo Popov, and the contacts he's made during his travels. "The whole thing comes about because of Hristo," Gelfand said. "He's a terrific impresario who pulls together friends from all over the world and this series is pretty amazing. It's a delight in this case to have Lara Nie come from New York to sing."

That explains the choice of *Erbarne dich*, the Bach aria, which Nie will sing on Sunday along with two opera arias by Handel from *Ariodante* and *Alcina*. "The first half of the concert is not really holiday music," Nie told us in a telephone conversation. "It's on the serious side. The Bach has a stunning violin obbligato which Hristo will play. We've collaborated frequently but have never been able to do something with the two of us."

Nie and Popov will also be featured in the Handel. "The violin part to one of them is a real standout," Nie said, "beautiful and serene, with a heartbreaking middle section." Nie, who began her career as a soprano, switched to mezzo a few years ago. "Mezzo music fits my personality and voice more than the ingenue roles I used to sing. I'm a very dramatic person and now I'm able to sing music from the heart and explore more introspective characters who have more experience in life and have advanced philosophical ideas you don't get from younger roles."

Another of the Handel arias features a bassoon obbligato that Gelfand will adapt to the cello, and he's planning to line Nie up for some verbal program notes. "I'm going to ask Lara to tell the audience the stories behind the arias, because they're pretty amazing. In *Verdi prati*, a knight gets whisked away on a hippogriff — a flying horse — just like something out of Harry Potter," he said. "The stories are pretty rich, and Lara is an expressive, dynamic mezzo who can put them across."

The December 15 concert will also feature the Cleveland Virtuosi Orchestra and the choir of Valley Lutheran Church, Chagrin Valley Chamber Music's home venue in Chagrin Falls. "The choir's made up of some wonderful people," Gelfand said, "and they'll join us in the first half in Bach's *Jesu, joy* and a movement from Vivaldi's *Gloria*.

In the second half, the secular side of Christmas takes over in full force. "We'll have an audience singalong — *Let there be peace on earth, Jingle Bell Rock, Frosty the Snowman, Sleigh Ride, White Christmas, Rudolph, Let it snow*," Gelfand said. Nie is equally excited about the second part of the program. "I've never had the opportunity to sing Christmas carols in public. Hristo and his friends are arranging some of them and others we'll put together ourselves. That will be different, and we'll try to make everybody happy — especially us!"

Michael Gelfand, who plays in a trio with Hristo Popov at Youngstown State University, is effusive in his praise of Popov and his series. "He never takes the easy way out and isn't afraid to tackle the big stuff. It's a nice, well-rounded series. The audience has a good time and people come from a wide area." He also notes the devoted cache of performers Popov has gathered — which includes himself. "I was asked to play three concerts this Sunday. When I have to choose, I always pick Hristo's first!"

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