

**Preview****Cornell University Chorus to sing at Holy Trinity, Akron on April 5**

by Mike Telin



Founded in 1921, the [Cornell University Chorus](#) is Cornell's premier treble voice ensemble. Comprising fifty women from a variety of backgrounds, the Chorus performs a repertoire spanning eight centuries and ten languages, including masses, motets, spirituals, folk, and a variety of other classical and contemporary pieces.

On Saturday, April 5, this celebrated chorus will present a concert beginning at 7:30 pm in Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Akron, as part of its 2014 Midwest tour. “What’s remarkable about this tour is that the students put it together entirely on their own,” chorus director Robert Isaacs told us during a recent telephone conversation. “They have a long tradition of student leadership which is one of the most exceptional things about the program. The quality of student leadership is every bit as good as the quality of the music making.”



This is Isaacs’s first year at Cornell and this tour is also his first with the Chorus. The tour, in addition to Akron, includes stops in Buffalo, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Bloomington, Evanston and Ann Arbor. “I have the great fortune of just tagging along on the bus and conducting,” Isaac joked. However, one of the things that drew Isaac to Cornell was the initiative, organization and opportunities for student leadership the chorus offers to its members. “They take it very seriously,” Isaac said, “they even created a million dollar endowment drive that they launched on their own accord. They handle every detail of the

chorus's operation, which is wonderful to see — the opportunity for leadership when the stakes are real.”

Each program on the tour will be chosen from a repertoire list of 14 pieces. “It's all unaccompanied music. A cappella singing is a specialty of mine ranging from the Renaissance to the present day,” Isaacs said, adding that all of the pieces explore the theme of stillness and motion. “Like dance, music is an art-form that is not always constantly in motion. And also like dance, it can beautifully depict stillness and moments of repose, so I thought it would be interesting to explore music and poetry around those themes.”

One example is Britten's setting of the Christina Rossetti poem, *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*. “Britten composed it as a very young man and it captures that frozen moment of stillness, when you see snow falling and it's constantly in motion yet constantly the same. We'll contrast that with something like Victor Paranjoti's *Dravidian Dithyramb*. Paranjoti describes it as a hymn, but it's a fantastic piece that runs pell-mell forward with ecstatic glee. So it's a piece that musically is constantly in motion.”

Another example of a piece representing stillness is John Sheppard's motet *Audivi vocem de caelo venientem*. “This comes from a period when composers would take small fragments of text, just a couple words, and stretch them out over long periods of time. So it might take 30 or 40 seconds to complete a single word.”

In 2003, the Cornell University Chorus launched a commissioning project known informally as “No Whining, No Flowers”. The goal of the project is to expand the contemporary repertoire for women's choirs by commissioning pieces from women composers using text from women writers. “So much of the music is about 'oh woe is me, my man done left me', or 'look at the pretty marigolds in the spring'. It was then chorus director Scott Tucker who said, why not start by finding music on different themes.”

This year's commission is from American composer Flannery Cunningham whose piece titled *Onion Days* combines the Carl Sandburg poem by the same title with a traditional [Scottish waulking song](#). “Sandburg's poem celebrates the simple dignity and beauty of the working poor, particularly women who were working in the cities in the early twentieth century. She's overlaid that with a traditional Scottish song. Waulking is an amazing tradition which I think is still kept alive in some far corners of Scotland: women will sit around a table and work on wool stretching it and helping it develop strength as it dries. It's very labor intensive: they're picking it up and passing it around in a big circle and they sing to pass the time while doing that.”

Isaacs said he was very pleased when he discussed the work with Cunningham and that she came up with an idea that celebrates strong women in two traditions. “It is about strength but a particular kind. Strength of endurance, in addition to hard work. And for a long time the human species has depended on the strength of women.”

Although [Robert Isaacs](#) is an American he has spent a good part of his career in the UK. “I spent a year on a fellowship there after finishing my undergraduate degree, got connected to the scene and kept going back and forth for some years. I learned so much by working with the National Youth Choir of Great Britain and it's exciting to bring some of those ideas to the program at Cornell.”

Isaacs also has a variety of interests. “I came up a slightly different route than many university choral conductors. I don’t have a doctorate and in fact my graduate work is in creative writing, which was kind of a fun sideline.” As a professional singer, Isaacs has performed with vocal ensembles including Laudibus, Cerddorion, Amuse, TENET, the Vox Vocal Ensemble and many others. “I did that for quite a few years and still do in New York City. It was fantastic because it afforded me the opportunity to work with world class conductors on all kinds of repertoire and to be exposed to repertoire that I might not have seen otherwise.”

Robert Isaacs also enjoys all styles of music. “I do find that all kinds of music inform each other. I used to say that I learned an awful lot about how to use vibrato expressively and appropriately in baroque music by listening to Ella Fitzgerald. She is in control of her voice and also how she delivers text with a slight detaching of text from the printed notation makes it pop alive and become very clear and as beautiful as a poem.”

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