

Cleveland Chamber Choir gives second concert at First Baptist, Shaker Heights (April 23)

by Daniel Hathaway



With its tuning challenges, tricky scherzo, and numerous transitions, Benjamin Britten's *Hymn to St. Cecilia* is a ten-minute *a cappella* tour de force that tests the mettle of any choir that takes it on. In the second performance of their inaugural season, the 33 voices of Cleveland Chamber Choir more than rose to the occasion on Saturday evening, April 23 at First Baptist Church in

Shaker Heights. In this and other British choral works, Scott MacPherson's new professional ensemble validated the initial impression they made last November: this is a superb addition to Cleveland's musical scene.

In a nod to the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death, MacPherson programmed two settings of the Bard of Avon's words: Cecilia McDowall's *When time is broke* and Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Three Shakespeare Songs*, and tucked brief excerpts into the program recited by David Hassler, director of the Wick Poetry Center at Kent State University, where MacPherson is on the faculty.

McDowall's three pieces received their U.S. premiere on Saturday, having been debuted by the BBC Chamber Singers only a few months before. McDowall mashed up lines from *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Sonnet VIII*, *Richard II*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet* to create a little compendium of Shakespearean references to music. Appealingly theatrical, the three songs included clapping in "Give me some

music” (to go with the “hot and hasty” Scotch jig), wild accords in “Mark how one string,” and shouts, foot stamping, and chord clusters (“straining harsh discords and unpleasing sharps”) in “How sour sweet music is.” The choir sang them with easy virtuosity, vividly capturing their wit and humor.

Vaughan Williams’ songs date back to 1951, but sounded as fresh and adventuresome for their time as McDowall’s does for hers. “Full Fathom Five” (from *The Tempest*) perfectly evokes the idea of submersion with its watery ambiance, while the rich harmonies of “The Cloud-Capp’d Towers” (also from *The Tempest*) conjure a sumptuous vision of man-made marvels soon to dissolve into nothingness. The very brief “Over Hill, Over Dale” is a delightful choral scherzo plucked out of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. More choirs should take these on, but it would be difficult to imagine another ensemble putting them across more masterfully.

The first half of the concert began with Grayston Ives’s *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, a warm and charming setting of Francis of Assisi’s well-known text alternating dancy passages with moments of calm and accompanied by toccata-like figures in the organ, brightly played by Robert Mollard. John Tavener’s brief *Song for Athene*, adapted by the late composer for the funeral of Princess Diana in Westminster Abbey, provided an immediate contrast with its drone-like liturgical starkness, ending with a jubilant “Alleluia.”

Then came Britten’s *Hymn to St. Cecilia*, the central and most substantial work of the program. W.H. Auden’s poetry, written to order for Britten, inspired the composer to amazing flights of musical fantasy — especially in his invocation of the violin, the drum, the flute, and the trumpets in the final section, which featured fine, short solos by Sarah Henley Osburn, Kimberly Lauritsen, Noah Hamrick, Anna White, and Bradley Upham.

Especially commendable — in addition to the choir’s excellent diction, intonation, and blend — was their light and effortless rendering of the scherzo (“I cannot grow; I have no shadow to run away from, I only play”).

The program was filled out by Jonathan Dove’s dance-like *Seek him that maketh the seven stars*, on texts from the *Book of Amos* and *Psalms*, and two folk song settings by Gustav Holst: “Mae ‘nghariad in’n Fenws” (“My Sweetheart’s Like Venus,” sung in Welsh), and the sea shanty, “Swansea Town.”

Cleveland Chamber Choir had an encore at the ready, continuing the British theme with an arrangement of The Beatles’ *Yesterday*.

In addition to the superb singing, Cleveland Chamber Choir gave its audience a lot of interesting information in the printed program for this concert, including program notes, full texts of the pieces, and bios. Next time around, perhaps a staple would be a nice addition: juggling four loose sheets of paper in close quarters is a tricky business.

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