

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: Chanticleer in “Trade Winds” (March 3)

by Daniel Hathaway



The Cleveland Chamber Music Society sailed into relatively uncharted waters on March 3, hosting the Bay Area male vocal ensemble Chanticleer in “Trade Winds.” This musical voyage took its name from a triptych by Zhou Tian, part of a varied program that called in at multiple ports for Italian madrigals, settings of *Ave Maris stella* (“Hail Mary, Star of the Sea”), an Edwardian part song, a

Portuguese Mass, songs from the Pacific, and English sea shanties.

Chanticleer’s reputation promised a large audience, and Plymouth Church was agreeably full well before concert time. The well-regimented 12-member ensemble of six countertenors, three tenors, and three baritones and basses marched out smartly, assuming the first of many formations that would change over the next two hours.

Snapping open their black folders in unison, the singers embarked on the evening’s voyage with madrigals by Monteverdi (*Zefiro torna*, *Sfogava con le stelle*, and *Ecco mormorar l’onde*) and Gesualdo (*Bella Angioletta*), demonstrating their disciplined sense of ensemble as well as the occasional tendency of individual countertenors to stick out of the blend.

Grieg’s beautiful *Ave maris stella* was a welcome oddity — though curiously placed before Victoria’s more ascetic setting. C.H.H. Parry’s *Never Weather-beaten Sail*, a text set in the 16th century by the lutenist Thomas Campion, was lusciously Victorian in style and beautifully sung by the conductorless ensemble.

Thanks to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, few of Filipe de Magalhães' works have survived, so it was interesting to hear parts of his *Missa O Soberana Luz* on this concert — even though the movements sung weren't quite the ones listed in the program.

Michigan State University professor Zhou Tian's *Trade Winds* took pride of place at the end of the first half of the program. This fascinating work, commissioned by Chanticleer, sets poems by John Masefield, Zhimou Xu, and Seth Michelson that in turn use old choral techniques, explore fresh ways of setting words, and dally with pop idioms.

A bouquet of folk songs drawn from a list in the program opened the second act, followed by straightforward arrangements of sea shanties by E.J. Moeran, Gustav Holst, and Robert Shaw with Alice Parker. Elaborate arrangements of Irving Berlin's *Blue Skies* and the Spiritual *Somebody Talkin' 'bout Jesus* by Chanticleer's former music director, Joseph H. Jennings, brought the evening to a rousing conclusion.

The acoustic of Plymouth Church, especially when approaching capacity, can be a bit dry for vocal music, although it's fine for instrumental chamber music. Throughout the evening, you had to wonder if this program might have worked more successfully at the Maltz Performing Arts Center, where the Society has relocated concerts this season that require piano.

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