

Quire Cleveland to sing Lamentation settings in two local churches founded by immigrants

by Daniel Hathaway



Jay White will lead Quire Cleveland in two performances of “Journey Home: Finding Unity after Loss,” a program of music based on the theme of exile, on Friday, February 28 at 7:30 pm at St. John Cantius Church, and Saturday, February 29 at 5:30 pm at St. Vitus Church. The performances are free, but freewill offerings will be received (suggested donation,

\$25) and each will be followed by a reception.

The concerts will be bookended by settings of the Lamentations of Jeremiah by 16th-century English composers Thomas Tallis and Robert Whyte that mourn the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar in the late 6th century BCE.

In his program notes, White writes, “Those who were important to the king were taken into captivity in Babylon. The remainder either fled for their lives or were killed. Those fortunate to escape became refugees in their own land, feeling forsaken by God.”

In a recent telephone conversation, White noted that Quire’s program grew out of his interest in engaging with Cleveland’s immigrant communities. “The idea of programming music about leaving home and moving miles away was a way of tying into those immigrants.”

The director ran across a *Cleveland.com* article that listed parishes that were still holding services in their members' original languages. "St. John Cantius and St. Vitus, founded by Polish and Slovenian immigrants, popped up." Then an internet search for related composers led him to Mikołaj Zielenki and Jacob Handl.



Jay White, who transitioned into teaching after a long career as a professional countertenor, said he had always loved Tallis' settings of the Lamentations. "When you actually look at the texts, you realize how devastating the language of exile is."

He added that for Tallis and Whyte, who remained loyal Catholics in Reformation England and never left the country as some of their colleagues did, the idea of living in exile was very relatable,

even if physical separation from their religious homeland wasn't the issue. "In both settings there are moments of great passion around the repeated words 'Jerusalem, return unto the Lord thy God.'"

Tallis and Whyte both wrote five- and six-voice settings of the Lamentations. Quire will be performing the five-voice versions. The texts are in the form of alphabetical poems, and both composers followed the old tradition of setting the Hebrew letters that separate the stanzas to music.

Jay White has filled in the program with Mikołaj Zielenki's *Vox in Rama* and *In monte Oliveti*, and Jacob Handl's *Miserere mei, Deus*, works that, like the Lamentations, are associated with the season of Lent, when Jesus himself spent forty days in exile in the desert. (The Lamentations are most frequently experienced during the services of Tenebrae that mark the final three days of Holy Week in liturgical churches.)

In last December's Carols for Quire concerts, White invited audiences to join in a community sing. "People raised the roof. So we asked the two congregations to choose a favorite or much-used hymn to sing during the 'Journey Home' concerts."

At St. John Cantius, the choice was *Serdeczna Matko*, at St. Vitus, *Hvala večnemu Bogu!* “Parishioners recorded the texts, and happily, there are countless videos and audio files online so we could practice pronunciation of the Polish and Slovenian words,” White said.



(L) St. John Cantius Church, (R) St. Vitus Church

White plans to continue collaborations with those two congregations in the future, with an eye to Christmas of 2021. “Jacob Handl is one of the premier polychoral composers, and we might be able to join with local choirs. Then we’ll go on to Latin America a few years down the line.”

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