

Preview

CMA VIVA! & Gala: Chanticleer to sing on January 30 in the museum's new atrium

by Mike Telin



Called “the world’s reigning male chorus” by the *New Yorker*, Chanticleer brings their 35th Anniversary concert tour to the Cleveland Museum of Art’s VIVA! & Gala series on Wednesday, January 30, beginning at 9:00 pm (note the late start time; an optional *Prix fixe* dinner begins at 7 pm). The concert titled *A Siren’s Call*, is an evening of seductive and irresistible songs of the sirens — sometimes fateful, sometimes fatal, will be performed in the newly opened Ames Family Atrium

and is presented in conjunction with the opening of the Renaissance galleries.

We spoke to Chanticleer’s interim music director, Jace Wittig, by telephone from his office in San Francisco.

Mike Telin: Thanks for taking the time to talk especially since you’re about to embark on an extensive tour.

Jace Wittig: Indeed, it’s quite a tour. We’re going everywhere from Texas to South Carolina, Florida to Cleveland and many other places. It’s kind of an everywhere type of tour.

MT: I was looking at the schedule and it was making me tired just reading it.

JW: It’s funny because people always assume that Christmas is the busiest time of year and certainly that is when we have the heaviest concentration of concerts. But this winter and spring we are on the road all the time.

MT: In addition to concerts you’re also doing a lot of “Interactive Educational Events” as well.

JW: That’s right. It’s very important that we do that, not only because there’re several of us for whom music education is a passion, but there has also been a marked decline in public school education over the last couple of decades. So it’s important that kids continue to hear classical music performed well and in a way that is both informative and inviting.

MT: How long have you been a member of the group?

JW: I sang with them for five years, and for the past two I have been the Interim Music Director.

MT: This is your 35th anniversary season. Congratulations! That is quite an accomplishment.

JW: Thanks. It's funny because I think there are only two or three people in the ensemble who had been born at the time the group was founded. But that's wonderful and it speaks to the fact that it continues to draw singers of each generation

MT: What is it about Chanticleer and its philosophy that has enabled it to thrive for 35 years?



JW: I think there are a few things. I think it has continued to thrive for people who are interested in being a member of Chanticleer because there are not a lot of other places you can go as a singer where you get to work on this variety of music. We do everything from Gregorian Chant to jazz and pops arrangements as well as newly composed choral works and everything in between. And we get to work on all of it with equal enthusiasm and in a collaborative manner — meaning that during rehearsals everybody has a say. Not that it's completely democratic, but everybody feels very invested.

We spend a lot of time talking about why we are singing the music and what the words really mean. I think that's very attractive to singers. Most of the time you simply can't go that far into the music because there's only enough time to make sure that everything is solid enough to perform. So that's why I think it has really thrived from within.

From an audience perspective I would say that everything I have talked about is reflected in the [quality of the] performances. It's very attractive for audiences to watch and listen to a group of people who are emotionally invested in what they are doing. And hopefully that manifests itself in a very clean, tight performance. We do get a lot of comments from audience members who say, wow, you guys really look like you're having fun.

MT: I have heard a number of Chanticleer concerts and I would have to agree. But what also strikes me, and this is evident from your recent appearance on Prairie Home Companion, is a sense of humor that comes through as being really honest, and not forced.

JW: Well, thank you. Prairie Home Companion was so much fun and we would go on anytime. But I do think it is important not to take ourselves too seriously, there has to be some fun in it too, right?

MT: Exactly! But on to the Cleveland concert. You'll be performing in the new Ames family Atrium; have you seen photos?

JW: Yes, I have seen photos and it looks really beautiful.

MT: The program is part of your most recent CD, A Siren's Call.

JW: Well the album is a highlights CD of this program, and although there is an hour's worth of music on the disc it's closer to two hours in concert.

MT: Also, what other concert can you go to and hear everything from Gesualdo, Palestrina and Gabrieli to Tom Waits and Freddy Mercury.

JW [laughing] that's right!

MT: Commissioning new works is a big part of what Chanticleer does; how do you go about choosing a composer, for example Chen Yi?

JW: Both of the commissions that are on this program are composers that we already know. Chen Yi has been in the Chanticleer family since the early 90's and Michael McGlynn has been writing music for us since the late 90s. And Vince Peterson has been arranging things for us for the past couple of seasons. Both Chen and Michael say they'll write whatever we want them to, which is very wonderful. Otherwise, I try my best to keep an eye out for composers who are coming up in the world and writing new and interesting music. I do that by checking out other groups and listening online. We always hope to find somebody who knows how to set text well, which is very important.

MT: I'm curious to know more about Jaakko Mäntyjärvi's piece.

JW: I love his music and we recorded one of his pieces on our Christmas CD with Dawn Upshaw. I think he is a genius of a composer. He's actually a professional translator as his first job. But I think he has a harmonic language all his own, but it is very approachable. It's not out there, it's just unique.

This piece tells the story of a ship wreck in the Baltic sea. The story also gets conspiracy theorists excited because nobody has been allowed to investigate it. It's a real epic of a piece lasting about ten minutes. A large portion of the text is actually taken from a Finnish Radio station that still exists in Finland that broadcasts news in Latin, which is so funny to me.

MT: One final question: what inspires you to get up and go to work every day?

JW: I love this organization. I loved singing in the group and I love getting to hear them sing every day. Everyone really pours themselves in rehearsals and into performances and for anybody who is a singer or musician, that is what you live for.

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