

Review**VIVA! & Gala at CMA (January 30)****Chanticleer: stunning concert in a spectacular space**

by Daniel Hathaway



In 1978, when Louis Botto founded Chanticleer with nine singers in San Francisco, the idea was to perform Medieval and Renaissance music using the male voices for which that repertory had been written. Thirty-five years later, the group numbers twelve, countertenors and male sopranos have been added to extend its range, and Chanticleer — named for the clear-voiced rooster in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* — has expanded its repertory and inspired a whole modern renaissance of composition for a cappella voices. That

the group now subtiles itself “an orchestra of voices” isn't just marketing hype. Male choral singing any more accomplished than this would be difficult to imagine.

On Wednesday evening, Chanticleer sang its program, “The Siren's Call” in the new Ames Family Atrium of the Cleveland Museum of Art, the first of several VIVA! & Gala performing arts series events to make use of that amazing space.

Chanticleer performed from a stage set against the back wall of the 1916 building, whose marble has been scrubbed and invited inside a vast space overdecked with acres of glass. Seating for the new café and exotic plants occupy one end. The capacity audience listened to the performance from folding chairs set in a wide configuration facing the stage.

It's fun watching people who walk into the Atrium for the first time pause, rubberneck and mouth whispers of awe. It looks spectacular, and now we're happy to report that music sounds good in the space. Though from its sheer size you might expect something like the boomy acoustics of Grand Central Station, musical textures flow clearly through the room. Was the singing on Wednesday evening electronically enhanced? Some thought so, others swore it was not. If it was, it was accomplished with remarkably subtlety.

Filing on dramatically with their usual drill-team precision through the automatic glass doors behind the stage, Chanticleer launched its program devoted to the seductive powers of the sea with three madrigals and a hymn by Andrea Gabrieli, Palestrina, Monteverdi and Gesualdo, engagingly varied in texture (Gabrieli's *Quand'havrà fine amore* for alternating treble and bass groups, Palestrina's *Ave maris stella* in alternation with chant, Mon

teverdi's *Non sono in queste rive* for five solo voices, and Gesualdo's *Luci serene e chiare* for the full ensemble). Throughout this group Chanticleer's singing was lithe and expressive, their blend and intonation flawless.



One more Renaissance part song, Gombert's affecting *En douleur et tristesse*, acted as a time portal to later examples of choral expressiveness through word-painting. Grieg's short but eventful *I laid me down to slumber* was set for solo voice and chorus and invested the word “never” with special poignancy. Elgar's energetic *Yea, cast me from heights of the Mountains* (words from the *Greek Anthology*) depicted thunderbolts and broken passions with striking choral effects. Arrangements of two songs for voice and piano, Barber's

Heaven-Haven (G.M. Hopkins) and Mahler's *Erinnerung* (*Remembrance*, Richard von Volkmann-Lenader) were tender on the one hand and wrenchingly emotional on the other. Mahler's setting of *Liebesklagen* (*love's lament*) brought its message across through chains of harmonic suspensions.

Having thoroughly warmed up its audience, Chanticleer got to the thematic point of the evening with a series of contemporary works, many of them commissioned by or written for the ensemble. Mason Bates's exquisitely layered *Die Lorelei* invoked the sirens who call to boatmen from the banks of the Rhein, pointing up the words *wundersame, ewaltige Melodie* (*peculiar, powerful melody*). Jaakko Mäntyjärvi's *Canticum calamitatis maritimae* told the tale of the mysterious sinking of an Estonian cruise ship through news broadcasts by a Finnish radio station (in Latin, if you can believe it!), then invoked Psalm 107 (“They that go down to the sea in ships”) by way of catharsis, finding picturesque ways to invoke the image of sailors reeling and staggering like drunkards.

Chen Yi's *The Siren's Call* put a Chinese spin on the topic, not through words but via cries and nonsense syllables. Changing the mood, John Corigliano's sumptuous *L'Invitation au Voyage* set words by Baudelaire imagining a boat trip to a place where “there is nothing else but grace and measure, richness, quietness and pleasure.”

The final changes on the theme of the sea were rung in Irish Gaelic settings by Michael McGlynn and a Japanese fishermen's song arranged by Osamu Shimizu. McGlynn's *Amhrán na Gaoithe*, *Hinbarra* and *Dúlamán* were delightful invocations of the relentless sea, the trials of seamen and the strange job of gathering seaweed. *Sohran Bushi* provided a wry commentary on the job of fishing, comparing the fickleness of seagulls to women.

Each of the seven recently-composed works presented their own difficulties for Chanticleer's dozen vocalists, who rose magnificently to the challenge, putting their inherent drama across to the rapt audience while tuning impossible stacks of pitches with precision and creating a vast range of special effects including the eerie keening of sopranos and the growl of low basses.

Out of several possibilities listed in the last section of the program, Chanticleer chose two to end the concert, Tom Waits's bluesy-jazzy *Temptation*, arranged by Vince Peterson, and a fusion of two slow-moving gospel songs (*The Old Ship of Zion* and *Over my head*) in arrangements by Gregory Peebles and acting music director Jace Wittig. The capacity audience, some of whom had attended a formal dinner before the 9pm concert, roared their approval at the end, bringing Chanticleer back for a final bow.

Published on clevelandclassical.com February 1, 2013