

## Review

### Stopping in at two Sunday afternoon concerts: Lara Nie with Cleveland Virtuosi in Chagrin Falls, Buck McDaniel at Trinity Cathedral

by Daniel Hathaway



Area concertgoers had their choice of at least seventeen concerts to attend on Sunday, December 15. I took the opportunity to stop in for two events which were of particular interest.

New York-based mezzo-soprano Lara Nie was featured with the Cleveland Virtuosi Orchestra in an afternoon holiday concert presented by Chagrin Valley Chamber Music Series at Valley Lutheran Church in Chagrin Falls. I caught the first half of the performance, which departed from holiday music in the direction of singer's choice. Nie had always wanted to perform the aria, *Erbarme dich* from J.S. Bach's *Matthew-Passion* — and a pair of Handel's opera arias — with violinist and artistic director Hristo

Popov, and this occasion was the perfect opportunity.

The Virtuosi, an eleven-member string ensemble with harpsichord conducted by Michael Gelfand, opened with a lush reading of Bach's chorale from Cantata BWV 147, known in English as *Jesu, joy of Man's desiring*.

Nie prefaced her singing of Handel's *Verdi prati* from *Alcina* with a paraphrase of its fantastical text, which involved an enchanted island and a ride on a flying horse, then sang the piece with a rich, centered tone, splendid intonation and a fine sense of style. Popov provided an elegant solo violin foil to the voice line.

Nie and Popov proved to be evenly-matched partners in *Erbarme dich*, stylishly sculpting their ornate lines and interacting with affecting expression. Overall, the piece was on the slow side and got a bit bogged down in overenthusiastic pizzicatos from cello and bass,

*Scherza infida* from *Ariodante* was the second Handel aria. Originally conceived for a *castrato* voice (which Nie coyly explained was a "slightly altered male"), the piece ended with a powerful little vocal cadenza that she tossed off with energy and passion. Alas, the cello and bass jumped the gun on the *da capo* and took a few bars to find their way back.

Nie suggested a transition into the seasonal part of the program with her encore, a sensitive performance of the *Coventry Carol*. The weather last weekend took its toll on the au-

dience, but the unusually small crowd that turned out was full of enthusiasm for Nie's singing and will want her back soon.

Trinity Cathedral's Sunday afternoon service of Compline takes place weekly from October through May except on the first Sunday of the month. On December 15, the quiet choral service — usually the last item before bedtime in monastic communities — was preceded by a performance of Nico Muhly's *O Antiphon Preludes* played by organist Buck McDaniel and interspersed with readings of the text and plainchant settings.

It was a big weekend for the medieval "O" antiphons, a set of seven medieval chants sung at Vespers on the last seven days of Advent which modern churchgoers know as the basis for the hymn *O come, o come, Emmanuel*. Clare College Choir built an entire program around them at Fairmount Church on Saturday evening.

Muhly, who grew up singing in an Anglican choir as a boy in Providence, RI, wrote his meditative settings for a service at Westminster Abbey, where they were played by James McVinnie in 2010.

The styles of the seven pieces range from Duruflé-like chant turned into polyphony (with a few blue notes tossed in) to minimalism (Muhly worked with Philip Glass) to bright chordal statements and a jittery French-style toccata. *O Rex Gentium* played repetitively with a short-long rhythmic figure. *O Emmanuel* consisted of chords under a high open fifth that sounded as though the upper notes were held down by wedges in the keys.

The antiphons resemble wonderful improvisations, each of which ends inconclusively as if waiting for something to happen — the very essence of the season of Advent. McDaniel, who is organist of Historic St. Peter's Church (where he performed these pieces earlier in December) and a composition student at CSU, as well as a member of the Complin choir, played them with fluency and style — managing to make even their minimalist passages sound supple and expressive.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 17, 2013*