

Review

Quire Cleveland — Carols for Quire 5 at Trinity Cathedral (December 20)

By Daniel Hathaway



Ross W. Duffin led Quire Cleveland in the first of three concerts in its annual “Carols for Quire from The Old & New World” series at Trinity Cathedral on Friday evening — a performance that will surely be counted as one of the brightest choral highlights of the holiday season.

Taking a new tack for the series’ fifth edition, Duffin constructed an intriguing program pairing older and

newer carols on the same or similar texts that brought freshness to what is becoming a cherished Cleveland holiday tradition — and setting some new challenges for his excellent, 20-voice chamber choir, founded to sing period music but which has recently been stretching its vocal wings in the direction of more modern repertoire.

Those pairings sometimes contrasted folksy settings with more artful versions: Jeremiah Ingalls’ (1805) vs. Elizabeth Poston’s (1967) take on *Jesus Christ, the Apple Tree*, or two Wassail songs from Kentucky (collected by John Jacob Niles, localized to Ohio and arranged by Duffin) and England (elegantly transformed into a part-song by Ralph Vaughan Williams). Sometimes originals like the 1554 *Coventry Carol* (arranged by Duffin) got completely new music, as in the bluesy, 1956 setting by Kenneth Leighton or in the case of the 15th century carol, *Alleluia: a newë work*, and its 1952 setting by Peter Wishart.

And sometimes Duffin had fun retrofitting texts that had no original settings to go with more recent compositions. He adapted the lyrics of Britten’s 1930 *Hymn to the Virgin* to a tune that, like the text, dates from around 1300, and similarly fit the early 16th century

words William Walton used for his 1961 carol, *What cheer?* to the Renaissance tune *Greensleeves*, arranging it over a ground bass.

And in a few cases, pairings just provided fun contrasts in approach to the same or similar texts. William Blake's *The Lamb* inspired equally beautiful but completely different settings by Charles Wood in 1927 and by the late John Tavener in 1982, as did a translation of *Es ist ein Ros* (famously set by Michael Praetorius in 1607) for Herbert Howells in 1919 and again for Paul Mealor in 2010 (*A Spotless Rose*).

Duffin also brought similar but non-parallel texts together whose subjects suggested each other. Franz Grüber's setting of Joseph Mohr's 1818 *Stille Nacht* made a nice pairing with Gustav Holst's 1906 setting of Christina Rossetti's 1857 poem, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, as did Thomas Tallis' 1575 *O nata lux de lumine* with Eric Whitacre's 2009 motet *Lux aurumque*, a strange case in which an English poem by Edward Esch was translated into Latin for the occasion.

Other pairings juxtaposed different settings of *The Holly and the Ivy* (Hereford traditional arranged by Duffin and 1913 by H. Walford Davies) and *Procedenti puero* (13th century and as set by Peter Warlock in 1918 under the title *Benedicamus Domino*).

All of that amounted to a rather lengthy list of twenty-five pieces, for which the well-prepared singers expertly adapted themselves to a wide variety of styles, singing with ease and confidence, with fine blend and attentive intonation. Mealor's *A Spotless Rose* covers the whole vocal range from low C's in the basses to high C's in the sopranos. Britten's double-choir *Hymn to the Virgin* calls for an echo chorus, in this case half of Quire deployed on the high altar steps. Whitacre's *Lux aurumque* demands fine tuning of complex chords. Poston's *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree* and Tavener's *The Lamb* seem simple but require purity of tone and acuity of tuning as well as strong choral discipline.

As an ensemble, Quire met those challenges handily and its individual members contributed some fine incidental solos along the way (especially baritone José Gotera in Howells' *A Spotless Rose*, who dealt skillfully with an uncomfortably fast tempo).

The enthusiastic audience wanted an encore and the choice was delightful: an in-house arrangement by Beverly Simmons and Daniel Singer of Tom Lehrer's *Hanukkah in Santa Monica* sanctioned by the famous 50s and 60s cabaret pianist-composer and former Harvard math instructor himself. (He lives! Who knew?)

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