

Contrapunctus to sing a millennium of music at St. John's Cathedral on June 6



by Daniel Hathaway

Don't be surprised if the second concert by Cleveland's new choral ensemble, Contrapunctus, at St. John's Cathedral in downtown Cleveland on Friday, June 6 at 7:30 pm, is missing a few voice parts — tenor and basses, in fact. British countertenor David Acres, who founded and conducts the ensemble, planned it that way.

“There's so much repertoire for high voices from about 950 to the present to explore,” Acres said in a telephone conversation. “We'll begin with a *Salve Regina* over a two-note drone and work our way forward through virtually every century to a piece written for sopranos and altos by one of Contrapunctus's own tenors, Kevin Foster. A lot of the music is outside the norm — pieces from the York Mystery Plays, Lassus, Landini, Lotti (a piece I'd never heard before), Kapsperger. It's not run of the mill, and I quite like that.”

Audiences may be accustomed to hearing upper-voice choirs from girls' schools and women's colleges, but Acres notes that Contrapunctus's sopranos, altos and countertenors will serve up something different for its audience in Friday's free concert. “We'll create a full-bodied sound and show how music written for these voices evolved over a thousand years. We have two incredibly low altos and two countertenors who can sing low and still sound like French *haute-contres*. In Britain, countertenors are falsettists who don't go into the *haute-contre* range.”

The musical textures in the Contrapunctus program are unusual, Acres said. “In John Sheppard's *Gloria*, the sopranos are zooming around on A's and B's, then the next

moment, you're down below middle C. For a Perotin piece, we'll have a countertenor solo over double and triple drones. After Godric's Hymns from the 1100s, polyphony begins to edge in and becomes very elaborate in the 1500s, then comes Grieg, Brahms and Holst."



Two composers in the latter part of the program are well known to American singers and audiences: Eric Whitacre and Ola Gjeilo. "A baritone I sang with recommended Whitacre after hearing his *Cloudburst*. Gjeilo came out of the blue. We'll sing his *Ubi Caritas*, which was originally written for sopranos and altos then rewritten in various forms. The original is different in texture and sound." David Acres has turned to social media to get to know Gjeilo. "The joy of Facebook is that if you're cheeky enough, you can avoid agents and carry on quite a dialogue directly with the composer. He's a lovely guy to talk to."

Contrapunctus is also welcoming new singers into the group for Friday's performance. "Previously, we were an amalgamation of different choirs. This time we have eight or nine out of the twenty-two voices who are not singing at Trinity Cathedral or in Quire or Apollo's Singers. That's intriguing for us and gives the group an individual sound. In England, The Tallis Scholars, Polyphony, Cardinall's Musick and The Sixteen all use the same singers, and the groups sound very much the same."

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