

Cleveland Chamber Choir to sing its debut concert at First Baptist November 21



by Daniel Hathaway

Cleveland's newest choral organization, the 36-voice Cleveland Chamber Choir, will sing its inaugural concert under the direction of Scott MacPherson on Saturday, November 21 at First Baptist Church in Shaker Heights.

Entitled "Dawn: Light—Evening: Night," the program will include Gustav Holst's *Nunc dimittis*, Claudio Monteverdi's *Ecco mormorar l'onde*, John Wilbye's *Draw on Sweet Night*, Robert Schumann's *Zigeunerleben*, Johannes Brahms's *O schöne Nacht* and *Dem dunkeln Schoss der heil'gen Erde*, Josef Rheinberger's *Abendlied*, Corey Rubin's *Euclid Avenue Songs*, Cecilia McDowall's *Aurea luce*, Andrew Rindfleisch's *Careless Carols* & Linda Kachelmeier's *Rise up to Greet the Morning Dawn*.

MacPherson, who has been director of choral activities at Kent State University since 2008, had founded his own professional chamber choir in San Antonio in 2005 while teaching at Trinity University. "I was with them for nine years — six of them after I moved up here. I was commuting to Texas to work with them ten weekends out of the year, but with a wife and small children, that became a drag."

When he decided to step down from the San Antonio Chamber Singers in 2014, MacPherson had kept the idea of starting a professional choir in Northeast Ohio in the back of his mind for years. "The opportunity of working with a professional ensemble is

something that I love,” he said in a telephone conversation. “Working in that intensive atmosphere also raises my collegiate work to a new level.”

Scott MacPherson also saw a choral vacuum he thought needed to be filled. “There are many wonderful choirs in the area, but I think there’s a niche for a professional group like this that performs the whole gamut of choral music from the Renaissance to cutting-edge new works.”



MacPherson is modeling the Cleveland Chamber Singers on 35-40 voice European choirs like Modus Novus in Cologne. “They call them project choirs. They meet for a few weekends of intensive rehearsal — and I mean intensive: Friday evening and all day Saturday and Sunday. This is easy in Germany with its fast trains. They sing, eat and drink together, then go back to work during the week.”

That’s not quite been possible to replicate in Cleveland, but MacPherson has been delighted with the initial response to his appeal for singers and the scheduling he’s been able to cobble together to prepare for the first performance. “A lot of passion and buzz went around when I put the word out. I was overwhelmed by the responses I was getting,” he said.

“I chose the 36 singers I wanted to use, then I had to work out a rehearsal plan that fit their schedules. We had one rehearsal in early October, then we were away from each other for three weeks. We rehearsed during two more intensive weekends, then we’ll meet again this Friday. The singers got the music a month in advance and were expected to be prepared when they attended the first rehearsal, so we could start polishing the music from the beginning.”

So far, the Cleveland Chamber Chorus has enjoyed the hospitality of the First Unitarian Society of Cleveland in the Coventry neighborhood, and of First Baptist Church in Shaker Heights. MacPherson is setting the wheels in motion to apply for non-profit

status. “A group like this can't function without financial support. It's not cheap to run. Besides paying the singers, there are all kinds of operational needs: programs, advertising. Groups before us may have ended their run based on finances rather than artistry. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that we'll have a decent audience this first time around and that people will see the value of it.”

Mac Pherson noted that the theme of the inaugural concert has to do with light or the lack of light in poetry and music. I asked him to talk about some of the newer pieces on the Choir's first program — many of which have close personal connections.

“Andrew Rindfleisch's *Careless Carols* is based on poetry by Rabindranath Tagore. It's a joyful piece about celebrating life in the moment. I've been an advocate of Andy's music since the '80s when we knew each other at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Half the choral music he's written were commissions from me and my choruses. It makes a beautiful, sparkling closer.

“There's also a piece by Corey Rubin, a former student of Andrew's at Cleveland State University entitled *Euclid Ave Songs*. They're very challenging, and they're based on poetry by Mark Twain, Helen Keller — an excerpt from her diary when she stayed at the Statler Hotel — and Harte Crane, who was a Cleveland native.

“British composer Cecilia McDowall's *Aurea luce* is a piece for organ and chorus that we'll perform with First Baptist's organist, Bob Schneider. It's a piece about light. It creates a spectacular atmosphere with a perpetual motion organ part under sustained lines in the chorus.

“Linda Kachelmeier was a cohort of Andy Rindfleisch and me at Madison. She went on to sing in the Rose Ensemble in Minneapolis, but she's now stepped down to focus more time on composition. I actually didn't know she was composing until I saw her booth at the American Choral Directors Association in 2013. I premiered her *O vos omnes* with my Madison ensemble, then when I was going through a pile of music she gave me, I found *Rise up to greet the morning dawn*. It's a dancelike, folk hymn setting, like some of Robert Shaw's arrangements. The KSU Chorale will be performing some of her carol arrangements during our holiday concerts. Linda's a singer herself, so she writes beautifully for voices.”

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