

Quire Cleveland: Carols for Quire 7 at St. Peter's Church (December 6)

by Daniel Hathaway



When you've presented a Christmas program every December for seven years, it could become a routine event — your institutional *Nutcracker*. Happily, Quire Cleveland has taken its “Carols for Quire” program in new directions and infused it with new twists every year. The 21-voice professional ensemble's concert on Sunday afternoon in the chaste, Gothic space

of St. Peter's Church in downtown Cleveland just might have been its best edition yet.

Founder and conductor Ross W. Duffin arranged this year's program into six choral tableaux (“Joy,” “Shepherds,” “Flowers,” “Christmas Day,” “Following a Star,” and “Twelfth Night”). Each section included old and new pieces that rang changes on the same theme.

For example, “Joy” was mirrored in four pieces: 15th and 16th century carols from England and Finland arranged by Duffin, a 16th century motet by Giaches de Wert, and a strophic carol by 20th century British composer William Walton. That mix of music also reflected the diversity of forms to be heard throughout the afternoon. Despite its title, the program included not only carols but also motets, a hymn alternating chant and *fauxbourdon*, a couple of rousing anthems, a chorus from Berlioz's oratorio *L'Enfance du Christ*, and a humorous counting song (in German) that probably originated at a Seder meal but got recast with Christian words.

Duffin was also careful to vary choral textures, choosing pieces like Jacobus Clemens' *Magi veniunt ab Oriente* (set for low voices), scoring certain pieces for semichorus, and featuring a number of singers in incidental solos.

Some standouts included John Rutter's *There is a flower*, commissioned by the choir of St. John's College, Cambridge (featuring a luminous solo sung by Margaret Carpenter), *Arise and hail the sacred day*, an energetic anthem by 18th-century British composer Joseph Stephenson, and Ian Humphris' splendid, witty arrangement of *The Twelve Days of Christmas* — including cackling bird sounds which sent at least two small human beings in the audience into paroxysms of glee every time the geese and hens came around.

Not quite as successful were Andrew Carter's arrangement of the faux-folksong *I wonder as I wander* (too ornate for the simple tune) and Berlioz's "Shepherd's Chorus," sung *a cappella* with organ interludes played from the gallery by Nicholas Haigh (a bit austere without its accompaniment and twangy instrumental comments). And while the singers obviously had a good time with *Die zwölf heiligen Zahlen* — especially the dozen soloists who stepped in and out of the chorus to deliver their lines — it's probably a piece more fun to sing than to listen to.

Throughout the program Quire sang with terrific blend, fine intonation, and rhythmic clarity, making little carols like the contemporary Latvian composer Andrejs Janson's *Meklētāja ceļš ir galā* sound as important as Richard Dering's big motet, *Quem vidistis, pastores*. At the end, Quire gave the admiring audience a let's-really-let-our-hair-down encore: a jazzy arrangement of *Jingle bells*. Makes you look forward to what Ross Duffin has in mind for Carols for Quire 8!

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