

Quire Cleveland's "Carols for Quire VIII" to feature a multitude of languages

by Daniel Hathaway



Fans of Quire Cleveland's annual Carols for Quire performances know that the ensemble's singers are adept at wrapping their tongues around any number of languages in the same program. But as co-founder and artistic director Ross W. Duffin notes, the forthcoming performances may well set a new record. In three performances next weekend, his nineteen professional vocalists will treat

their audiences to carols in Finnish, Abenaki, Afro-Portuguese, Mohawk, and Wendat, as well as in English, Latin, and Spanish.

"I'm always challenging the singers, but I think they were looking askance at me this time just because of all the special requirements," Duffin said in a telephone conversation from his office at the music department of Case Western Reserve University.

One of those special requirements centers around the longest work on this year's program, an *Ensalada* or musical salad by the 16th century composer Bartolomé Carceres. "Its title, *La Trulla*, means something like 'The Hubbub,'" Duffin explained. Published in 1581 by Matheo Flecha in his collection *Las Ensaladas*, the 20-minute scene links songs, dances, and narrative. "It's set in a village near the Nativity," he said, "but in Spain rather than in the Middle East. Villagers are talking about how wonderful it is that this baby's been born, and they should sing songs. Somebody sings in Portuguese, somebody in Basque, and somebody in Valencian. And they say, 'Now that we've had a lot of fun, let's do a dance.'"

The village can't agree on what kind of dance to do, rejecting a galliard in favor of a pavane. "Finally, they realize that everybody's sung except the Virgin Mary, so then she sings too," Duffin said. "It's charming, and it gives the villagers an excuse to go through all these Christmas songs from different regions of Iberia and link them with the cover story of the Nativity. It's complicated to put together, but it's really fun."

Duffin's program begins with a Latin motet by the Alsatian composer Christoph Thomas Walliser (1568-1648), who he describes as "a big fish in the little pond of Strasbourg. It's quite a substantial piece and reminiscent of Hans Leo Hassler." Duffin noted that since Quire is in its element in polyphonic, double-chorus pieces, *Cum natus esset Jesus* makes a fine beginning to the program.

Two 16th-century Finnish carols, a modern arrangement of the Latvian carol "The Christmas Rose," and the Ensalada will complete the first half of the program. After a motet by Jacobus Clemens non papa ("not the Pope") on the subject of the Magi, Quire will turn to three New World carols with a fascinating cross-Atlantic history.

While researching a previous Carols program that included Charpentier's *Messe de Minuit*, a mass setting based on Noëls, Duffin discovered links between those popular French Christmas songs and carols brought to North America by Catholic missionaries.

"Charpentier was working at the Jesuit church in Paris when he wrote *Messe de Minuit*, and here was St. Jean de Brébeuf in Ontario writing his *Huron Carol* to one of the same Noël tunes. It's clear that the Jesuits were really fond of these Noëls and wanted to share them with their flock in the New World, so they translated them into local languages."

Quire will sing Duffin's arrangement of Brébeuf's carol in Wendat, as well as two carols in Abenaki and Mohawk that use the French carol tune *Joseph est bien marié* and the hymn melody *Conditor alme siderum*. "Native American languages look very strange on the page, but I think it's fun for the audience to see them in print," Duffin said, referring to titles like *Ies8s ahatonnia* and *8i8 satannitenrascon*. "Since French missionaries were transliterating these words, I figure that the number 8 serves sometimes as a 'w' and sometimes as a 'u.' I've created a phonetic transcription for the singers."

"Really fun, interesting, and unusual," is how Duffin describes the anonymous carol *Sã aqui turo zente pleta*, a piece Quire will sing in its original Afro-Portuguese, with a little help from a scholar Duffin calls the world's authority on that language, and some extra advice from people at the Smithsonian Institution, who also weighed in on the pronunciation of the Native American tongues.

English returns to the menu at the end of Quire's concert, with William Billings' *Judea* and *Shiloh*, also known respectively as "A Virgin unspotted" and "Methinks I see a heavenly host." The final set includes early 20th-century British carols by Gustav Holst (*In the bleak midwinter*), Charles Wood (*The Lamb*), and Peter Warlock (*Benedicamus Domino*).

Simple and direct, the Holst — along with the *Huron Carol* — has attracted some 50,000 views on Quire's YouTube [channel](#). Those are two pieces Duffin is happy to revive for the eighth edition of Carols for Quire. "We haven't repeated many things during the last seven programs, but it seemed like it was time to bring some things back."

"Carols for Quire VIII" will be performed three times: on Friday, December 2 at 7:30 pm at Trinity Cathedral in downtown Cleveland; on Saturday, December 3 at 7:30 pm at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Akron; and on Sunday, December 4 at 4:00 pm in Historic St. Peter's Church in downtown Cleveland. Visit Quire's [website](#) for tickets.

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