

Quire Cleveland: “Carols for Quire VIII” at Trinity Cathedral (December 2)

by Daniel Hathaway



Most choirs do well to take on one or two non-English languages in their programs. Quire Cleveland handily dispatched Christmas music from five centuries in Latin, Finnish, Latvian, Spanish (in several of its dialects), Wendat, Abenaki, Mohawk, and Afro-Portuguese in the eighth edition of “Carols for Quire” at Trinity Cathedral on Friday evening, December 2. Whatever the

language, they sounded terrific.

Artistic director Ross W. Duffin expanded the category of “Carols” a bit by including two Renaissance motets in the mix. The first half opened with Alsatian composer Christoph Thomas Walliser’s *Cum natus esset Jesus*, the second half with Flemish composer Jacobus Clemens non papa’s *Magi veniunt ab oriente*, two pieces that showed off Quire’s expertise in crafting transparent performances of complex polyphony.

The Walliser, a festive, double-choir piece that pits high voices against low, contrasts polyphony with dancey triple-rhythm sections and brought all nineteen singers into play. The Clemens — chronicling the visit of the Wise Men to the manger in Bethlehem — was just as expertly sung by a slightly reduced ensemble of thirteen voices.

A “Northern” section offered two of Duffin’s arrangements of Finnish carols from the 1582 collection *Piae Cantiones*. Those who don’t recognize *Lapsed caicki laolacatt* will probably know the tune as “*Personent Hodie*.” That and *Iloidcam ja remuidcam*

received beautifully lucid performances from Quire, followed by a lush setting of *Meklētāja ceļš* (“*The Christmas Rose*”) by Latvian composer Andrejs Jansons.

The true oddity in Carols VIII was an *Ensalada* or musical salad by the mid-16th century composer Bartolomé Carceres, a little *a cappella* folk opera (a Renaissance Zarzuela?) set in Spain and — improbably — not far from the Inn of Bethlehem. A whole village gets involved in this 20-minute scene titled *La Trulla* (translated by Duffin as “The Hubbub”).

Individual villagers are called out for songs and dances in a variety of dialects and styles. Not even the Virgin Mary escapes the spontaneous talent show, which ends with Christmas and New Year’s greetings and a *Gloria Patri*.

Duffin and Quire pulled the wordy piece off with engaging wit and style. Just when the audience’s attention might have begun to flag, the sounds of Renaissance percussion instruments underscored the pavane with bright new timbres, and a succession of fine solos provided sonic variety. Thanks to Quire’s excellent diction, the lengthy text printed in the program was easy to follow.

Jesuits carried French Noël’s to the New World and re-texted them in Native languages, the source for Duffin’s simple and effective settings of three carols sung by Huron, Abenaki, and Mohawk converts. Slaves from Guinea were represented by a striking Afro-Portuguese carol, *Sa aqui turo zente pleta*, featuring a splendid solo by baritone Brian MacGilvray.

Energetic performances of New England Revolutionary-era composer William Billings’ lively and charmingly rough-edged carols *Judea* and *Shiloh* led to more refined settings of three carols by 20th-century British composers. Charles Wood’s lovely *The Lamb*, setting words by William Blake, might have used a bit more breathing room, but Gustav Holst’s *In the bleak midwinter* — a Quire favorite — was unhurriedly elegant in its strophic simplicity.

The relatively short program ended with Quire’s bright-hued, dashing performance of Peter Warlock’s medieval-modern carol, *Benedicamus Domino*. Philip Heseltine — the composer’s birth name — is said to have been so depressed after attending an amateur choral society’s performance of his *Three Carols* that he put the cat out, turned on the oven, and gassed himself. Had his works instead been performed by Quire Cleveland, we might have had many more colorful works from Warlock’s pen to enjoy.

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