Quire Cleveland to sing reconstruction of Richard Davy's *Matthew Passion*

by Daniel Hathaway

Here's a librarian's nightmare: knowing what you should find between its covers, you sit down to examine one of the great sources of English pre-Reformation music, only to discover that one-third of its contents no longer exists.

It's still a mystery why so many pages of the late 15th-century Eton Choirbook that contains Richard Davy's *Matthew Passion* went missing. But this weekend, Northeast Ohio audiences can hear Quire Cleveland sing the complete work in a restoration by its artistic director, Ross W. Duffin.

Performances will take place on Saturday, April 8 at 7:30 pm at St. Bernard's Church in Akron, and twice on Palm Sunday, April 9 — at 3:00 pm at Historic St. Peter's in downtown Cleveland, and at 7:00 pm (*note corrected time*) at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights.

Davy, who was master of the choristers at Oxford's Magdalen College in the early 1490s, wrote the first polyphonic setting of the Passion of Jesus we have by a known composer. Davy employed Sarum chant (named after Salisbury Cathedral) for the words of the Evangelist and Jesus, but set the words of the crowd and the other characters in four-voice polyphony. This weekend, guest soloists Owen McIntosh and Jeffrey Strauss will chant the words of the Evangelist and Jesus, and the 17 professional singers of Quire Cleveland will cover all the other roles.

Davy's *Passion* appears at the very end of the large-format Eton Choirbook, which is otherwise a collection of Marian motets. For performance, the tome would have been placed on a lectern and surrounded by the singers of the Eton College Chapel. It originally contained 93 works, but only 64 have survived either whole or in part. "The

missing leaves have been gone for a long time," Duffin said in a telephone conversation. "Davy's music is just beautiful, its Eton-style polyphony spectacular, with lively syncopations and florid passages. I just thought somebody ought to be performing this music, so that's why I decided to reconstruct it."

He didn't set himself an easy task. Of the 42 short polyphonic movements in the Passion, the first 11 are entirely missing, and the next 12 lack treble and tenor parts (the chant was sung from a separate book). Other editors had taken on the challenge before — Sir Richard Terry in 1921, and Frank Ll. Harrison in 1958 — but Terry's is lost, and Duffin felt that the material Harrison used to replace missing pages (adapted from Davy's later movements) lacked modal variety and suffered from mistakes in part-writing.

Having begun the reconstruction three decades ago as a graduate student at Stanford, Duffin returned to the project and published his edition of the piece in 2011. "I thought that Davy's Passion might enter the repertory as a result. But that didn't happen. So I thought Quire should take it on and show what a fantastic piece it is, and maybe that would encourage others to perform it as well."
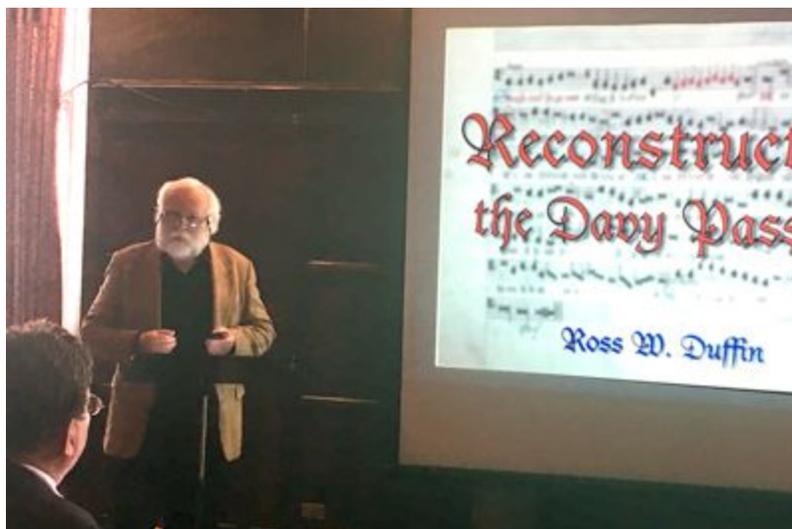
To involve modern audiences more deeply in the experience, Duffin has replaced the original Latin text with the English translation made by William Tyndale, Davy's near-contemporary at Magdalen College. "It's so vivid that I thought it could work in performance. I think it's going to be entrancing for the audience," Duffin said. "And unlike the Bach Passions, there are no arias or other insertions, which makes the narrative thread particularly strong."

The 50-minute Passion will be followed immediately by *Ah, Gentle Jesu,* a contemporaneous Easter carol by a composer named Sheryngam. "Passion Plays of the period end in an imagined dialogue with the risen Christ," Duffin said. "Because the Gospel text ends with the chant narrative of the three Marys visiting the tomb, I thought the Passion needed to conclude with something polyphonic. In Sheryngam's piece, Jesus admonishes a sinner to contemplate the crucifixion and what it means."

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