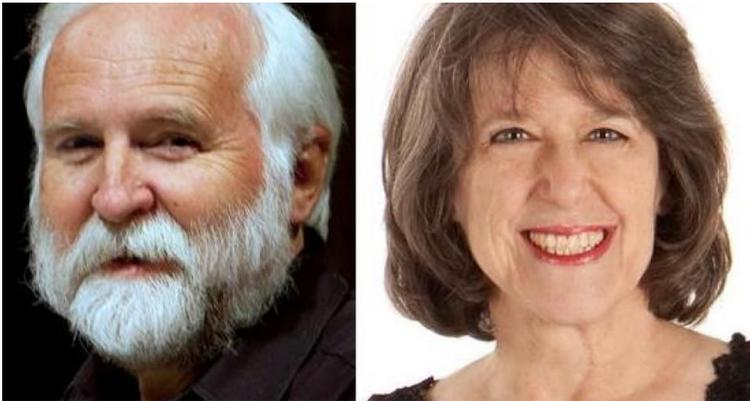


Ross Duffin & Beverly Simmons talk about Quire Cleveland's 10th Anniversary Season

by Daniel Hathaway



The fall of 2008 — with its dismal financial meltdown — probably wasn't the most propitious time to start a new professional choral ensemble, but nine years later, founders Ross Duffin and Beverly Simmons find themselves basking in the success of Quire Cleveland. The group will

launch their tenth season this weekend with performances of music by Henry Purcell at Lake Erie College in Painesville (October 5) and St. John's Cathedral in downtown Cleveland (October 6), followed by more concerts than Quire has ever scheduled before in a single season.

In addition to the Purcell programs in October, the Carols for Quire performances in December, an April collaboration with Debra Nagy's French Baroque ensemble Les Délices, and a grand finale of favorites from the past decade in May, Quire will revive two past programs. "Sing You After Me: Wondrous Rounds and Catches" will be presented in Akron on October 29, and "The Land of Harmony: American Choral Gems" will be performed both at the Holland Theater in Bellefontaine (May 12) and at First Lutheran Church in Lorain (May 13).

Over coffee at a University Circle café, Duffin and Simmons, who share artistic and managerial functions, gave details of Quire's forthcoming programs. The first one, devoted to music Henry Purcell wrote for the English Chapel Royal, has been on Duffin's mind for some time. Duffin and Simmons got up close and personal with part of Purcell's world during a trip to London with their children in 2000. "Ross was invited to visit the private Chapel at St. James' Palace, which was served by a number of famous composers," Simmons said. "Purcell sang there as a boy and returned as a 'Gentleman of the Chapel' when he was 22."

Duffin, who serves as Distinguished Professor of Musicology at Case Western Reserve University, had been corresponding with the Chapel's Sergeant of the Vestry about partbooks owned by the University. "He gave us a private tour of the chapel," Duffin said. "It's not so imposing a space, but it was there that Queen Elizabeth waited out news of the Spanish Armada, and Princess Diana was laid in state. I was allowed to flip through the pages of The Old Cheque-book where singers like Byrd and Gibbons signed in." Simmons added that the Sergeant took her and the children to see the portion of Crown Jewels that are not on display at the Tower of London, and showed them the choir vestments that are still made in the same style as in Purcell's time.



That experience helped inform Duffin's choice of repertoire for this season's opening concerts, which include English anthems, psalms, Latin motets, and funeral sentences expressly written for that Chapel by Purcell, who also provided more elaborate music for Westminster Abbey. "His music is so incredible to sing," Simmons said, "with its crunching harmonies and lyrical melodies." Duffin agreed, adding, "Nobody sets music to the English language like Purcell, and his harmonies are so progressive that some of his chords have never been described."

Duffin noted that one stunning piece, the 8-voice *Hear my prayer, O Lord*, was sung last season in St. John's Cathedral by the Belgian choir Vox Luminis. "They scooped me a bit by both beginning and ending their program with it, but I couldn't resist programming what my son calls 'the greatest piece ever.'"

Quire's "Carols for Quire IX," to be performed at Trinity Cathedral (December 15), at St. Christopher's in Rocky River (December 16), and at Historic St. Peter's in downtown Cleveland (December 17), will include favorites from past carol concerts, Duffin arrangements, and works by Eric Whitacre and Paul Mealor, as well as a Hanukkah section that was more than gently suggested by Beverly Simmons.

"That includes Tom Lehrer's *Hanukkah in Santa Monica*, but also some Renaissance pieces," Duffin said. He discovered that the Jewish hymn *Rock of Ages* is based on a hymn by Johann Walther, and that a traditional psalm sung during that holiday is related to a motet by the Venetian composer Giovanni Bassano. Duffin has replaced the Latin texts with Hebrew in his arrangements of those pieces.

Quire's programs with Les Délices in Willoughby Hills, Lakewood, and Shaker Heights (April 27-29) represent an important first collaboration between the two groups. "French Baroque music isn't programmed so often," Duffin said, "and Debra Nagy has found all kinds of pieces nobody's turned up before." The concerts, guest conducted by Scott Metcalfe of Boston's Blue Heron ensemble, will include an 11-voice motet by Charpentier, and will feature soloists Owen McIntosh and Jeffrey Strauss, who sang in Quire's performances of Richard Davy's *Matthew Passion* last season.

In May, a free grand finale concert at St. John's Cathedral will bring some of Quire's alumni back to the ensemble for a concert of favorites from the past decade. That playlist, suggested by Duffin, and vetted by Simmons and Quire co-founder John McElliott, will begin with Byrd's *Sing Joyfully* (the first piece ever performed by the ensemble).

Wrapping up our chat, Duffin spoke not only about Quire's loyal following in Northeast Ohio, but also noted its increasing audience around the world through the videos he's edited and uploaded to the chorus's YouTube Channel. "We have over 200 videos posted," he said. Simmons added that in the next few days those will have attracted over 700,000 views. "Our viewers come from 210 countries, and we get messages from all over the place," Duffin said. "That's a big international reach for a professional choir in Cleveland, Ohio, and many of the performances feature works that haven't otherwise been recorded."

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 2, 2017.

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