

In “Carols IX: Carols of Yore,” Quire Cleveland pulls from past favorites and adds Hanukkah

by Jarrett Hoffman



Quire Cleveland’s latest holiday program spans from the 13th century up to this very decade. But that’s not the only way “Old & New” describes the ensemble’s ninth annual “Carols for Quire” concert, to be performed from December 15-17 in Cleveland and Rocky River. In honor of its tenth anniversary season, the choir will reach into its bag for some favorite carols from seasons past, and will close by celebrating the addition this year of Hanukkah music.

“A lot of what Quire does is Christian music, there’s no question about it,” Ross Duffin, founder and artistic director, said in a recent conversation. “That’s a large part of choral singing generally, just because the church has been such an important and ubiquitous patron for composers and singers throughout history.”

Duffin credited Executive Director Beverly Simmons — who also sings alto in the ensemble and is married to Duffin — for the idea to expand this year’s program to Hanukkah. “Her background is Jewish, and she sings every year for the High Holy Days,” he said.

The idea began with singer-songwriter Tom Lehrer’s (*I’m Spending*) *Hanukkah in Santa Monica*. Together with Daniel Singer, a fellow Quire member and Assistant Director of the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, Simmons arranged the Broadway-style, comedic tune as an encore for Quire’s “Carols V” back in 2013. “Bev got permission from Tom Lehrer himself to make the arrangement, and it turned out really well,” Duffin said. “We decided to do it again, but Bev thought it would be really nice to have more than just that for Hanukkah.”

Duffin set to work, devising two settings “that have not survived from the Renaissance, but could have existed,” as he writes in his program notes. The first is *Mi yimalel* by Giovanni Bassano, originally published as *Con temini Domino*, a motet with Latin text in Bassano’s 1599 *Concerti Ecclesiastici*.

Two things led me to make this arrangement. The first is that, although Bassano was a cornetto player at the Cathedral of San Marco in Venice, he was almost certainly Jewish. From surviving letters, we know he was cousin to the Bassanos, Jewish musicians in the royal wind band in England. The second thing is that the text is a setting of Psalm 106, which extols the bravery of the Maccabees and is sung frequently at Hanukkah. It occurred to me that Bassano may have chosen to set this psalm because of its connection to the Festival of Lights, and that, as a Jew, he may have had the Hebrew text in mind when he first sat down to write it.

The other new piece is a setting of Ma’oz Tzur Yeshu’ati, a Hebrew version of the popular Hanukkah song Rock of Ages...[which] seems to have its origins in the 16th-century hymn Nun frewt euch ließen Christen gmeyn, first published in Martin Luther’s hymnal of 1524. Luther’s colleague Johann Walter made multiple settings of this hymn; I have chosen his 1551 musical setting...to use with the Hebrew words. Something like this must have happened for the song to have adapted this melody; this is a version of how it might have sounded in the 16th century.

Preceding the section of the program devoted to Hanukkah are sets representing England, France, Germany, Flanders, and the 21st century. Comprising Eric Whitacre’s *Lux aurumque* and Paul Mealor’s *A Spotless Rose*, the latter part contrasts significantly with the rest of the program. “They’re both Ligeti-like in terms of their ethereal harmonies, beautifully crunching dissonances, and incredible ranges,” Duffin said. “Between the two of them, they go up to soprano high C and down to bass low B, which is more than two octaves below middle C.”

In Whitacre’s famous “internet choir” project for *Lux aurumque*, Duffin said that people “submitted themselves singing this piece, and he made a YouTube video that included them all, sometimes with every face on the screen.” Mealor, on the other hand, is known for having composed music for the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. “There are many great composers active today, but these two pieces go well together stylistically and really show what Quire can do in terms of extended vocal requirements.”

This year's program includes songs in six languages, a definite challenge but a drop-off from the eight of last year. "It's funny, I didn't realize I was throwing so many at them," Duffin said. How does the choir get lips, tongues, and throats comfortable and ready for such a linguistic obstacle course?

"Many of the singers have been with Quire for such a long time that they do it almost without any special accommodations. Occasionally I have spoken a lyric and sent everybody a recording. In some cases, like for Latvian and Finnish, I've actually solicited recordings from native speakers to say the lyrics. It's tricky because pronunciations are sometimes sung and spoken differently, so it's important to get a singer to do that so you can get those details as right as possible. In the case of Hebrew, Merav Eldan, one of our singers this year, is from Israel. She'll get some solo work, and she's also a watchdog for our pronunciations."



This time of year, Duffin is also wrapping up his semester at Case Western Reserve University, where he directs the Collegium Musicum and serves as Distinguished Professor of Musicology. This fall, like many before, he led Introduction to Performance Practice. "I've taught this course every year since I've been here, except when I've been on sabbatical. It's one I enjoy and one that lights a fire under some people."

After all the papers are graded and batons put down, Duffin hopes to spend as much time with family as possible in his native Canada. "Our daughter is also married to a Canadian, so we're going to meet up there, hopefully see my sister's family, and maybe get to spend some time with our son and his family. That's the goal."

“Carols for Quire IX” will be performed three times: on Friday, December 15 at 7:30 pm at Trinity Cathedral in downtown Cleveland; on Saturday, December 16 at 7:30 pm at St. Christopher’s Church in Rocky River; and on Sunday, December 17 at 4:00 pm in Historic St. Peter’s Church in downtown Cleveland. Under-18’s are free. Visit Quire’s [website](#) for tickets.

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