

“Carols for Quire IX” at Trinity (Dec. 15)

by Timothy Robson



The ninth annual edition of Quire Cleveland’s “Carols for Quire IX from the Old and New Worlds” offered a pleasing respite from both the British cathedral and collegiate chapel carol traditions so commonly emulated in the United States, as well as the popular symphonic Christmas concerts. At first glance, the program seemed quite austere:

at least in the U.S., names like Lully, Rameau, and DuFay are not normally associated with Christmas music. I attended the first of three performances, on Friday, December 15 at Trinity Cathedral in downtown Cleveland.

Artistic Director Ross Duffin conjured a program that imaginatively adapted Christmas texts to fit existing musical material from other contexts. Throughout the program solo voices were used in various combinations to highlight the texts, sometimes in alternation through the stanzas of a carol. This was a mixed success, as some of the soloists were stronger than others.

The concert featured works from England, France, Germany, and Flanders, as well as from 21st-century composers. Three selections that made a nod to Hanukkah were also included. The program notes were thorough, and complete texts and translations were provided.

The concert opened with a highly rhythmic performance of one of the most familiar 15th-century carols, *Nowell sing we*, with its mixture of Latin and English texts. Duffin reconstructed Robert Croo’s ca. 1534 version of the *Coventry Carol*, a retelling of King

Herod killing the innocents after the birth of Jesus. William Byrd's *Lullaby* ("My sweet little Babie...") is an exquisite setting of Mary's song to the infant Jesus that predicts her child's eventual death at the hand of a king.

The French set included the Medieval carol *Orientis partibus* ("Out from lands of Orient") but in a hilarious 19th-century English translation telling of the trials of the put-upon ass that carried the three Magi to Bethlehem. Charming songs by Lully and Rameau originally intended for theatrical productions were given Christmas texts. We now know Lully's *Venès lèu* as "Bring a torch, Jeanette, Isabella." Rameau's *Ô nuit!* was subtle, featuring stylish ornamentation by the soloists.

In the German set, Franz Gruber's *Stille Nacht* returned to its origins, with significant melodic differences from the version that 21st-century American listeners usually experience. Tenor Corey Shotwell's solo stanza was exquisite, although later, Quire Cleveland's usually excellent intonation suffered some anomalies. The three stanzas of *Wachet auf* were boldly sung in two versions: Michael Praetorius's setting of the first two verses was rhythmically rousing, while Johann Sebastian Bach's setting of the third, from the cantata of the same name, smoothed out the original's rough edges.

Moving to the Flanders section, Roland de Lassus's joyous *Resonet in laudibus* used the same tune heard earlier in the program in Johann Walter's German setting of *Joseph lieber*. The Gregorian Christmas hymn *Christe redemptor* intermingled chant with Guillaume DuFay's 15th-century polyphonic paraphrase.

Skipping over the 19th and 20th centuries, Quire Cleveland turned to music of our own time. American composer Eric Whitacre's *Lux aurumque* ("Light and gold") uses a Latin translation of an English poem by Edward Esch, while British composer Paul Mealer's *A Spotless Rose* sets Catherine Winkworth's 19th-century poem. These two contemporary works showed the choir's best singing of the evening, marked by perfect intonation and blend. Quire Cleveland has made its reputation in early music, but many of those same characteristics carry over into contemporary music — perhaps another source for future exploration.

The final section celebrated Hanukkah, beginning with Ross Duffin's adaptation of a Hebrew text from Psalm 106 to fit Giovanni Bassano's motet *Confitemini Domino*. In another stroke of imaginative musicology, he set the words from *Ma'oz Tzur Yeshu'ati*, a Hebrew version of the Hanukkah song *Rock of Ages*, to Johann Walter's *Nun frewt euch liessen Christen gmeyn*, a 1551 tune which resembles *Ma'oz Tzur*.

The concert closed with a hilarious setting of American musical humorist Tom Lehrer's *(I'm Spending) Hanukkah in Santa Monica*, authoritatively arranged by Beverly Simmons and Daniel Singer and robustly performed by Quire Cleveland.

Phil Neuman's lavish treatment of *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* served as an encore. Duffin told the audience that Neuman said his piece always gets a standing ovation, and that was also the well-deserved case here.

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