

The U.K.'s Marian Consort at St. John's Cathedral (Oct. 19)

by Nicholas Stevens



To speak of our era as one of unlimited access to global cultures is to imply — often inaccurately — that availability necessarily leads to familiarity. In the cases of art forms with deep roots in a particular place, no amount of streaming audio or video can stand in for the kind of live exposure that knocks one backward with the full force and physical presence of the new. How fortunate for Northeast Ohioans, then, that the Cathedral of St John

the Evangelist invited the Marian Consort to Cleveland as the penultimate stop on their first North American tour. Their concert of music inspired by the Virgin Mary spanned centuries of sacred music in the English choral tradition.

Founded as a sextet, the Consort appeared on Friday, October 19 as a flexible ensemble: founder, director, and countertenor Rory McCleery conducted, and the remaining eight singers split into groups of three or more for each piece.

Tenors Guy Cutting and Edward Ross sang in sweet harmony in Byrd's *Salve Regina*, and first alto Helen Charlston's powerful yet velvety tone lent a distinctive richness to the group sound, as it would all evening.

In her *Magnificat* for sextet, Roxanna Panufnik's compositional voice held as much appeal as the literal voices of the singers. The Cathedral's long echo did the audience a favor by keeping first soprano Charlotte Ashley's crystalline voice ringing several seconds after the piece ended. Despite the clarity and quality of her sound, Ashley sang with restraint throughout.

McCleery aimed for productive contrast in his program order. Cornysh's *Ave Maria*, a low-quartet showcase in which Charlston served as a natural leader, paired well with the sad, beautiful *Dormi Jesu* for high-voice trio by Dodgson that followed. Octets by Tallis and Tavener gave bass Nick Ashby a chance to lay out warm blankets of sound.

Second alto Hannah Cooke led with confidence in Ludford's *Ave cuius conception*, which also found second soprano Rachel Ambrose Evans soaring in a duet with Ashby. Gabriel Jackson's *Salve Regina* began and ended with chilly harmonies, arrayed around a warm center.

After an intermission, Ross sang the *Salve Regina* chant unaccompanied from the far end of the space, setting up a breathtaking performance of Howells's 1915 *Salve Regina* by the remaining septet. The four men of the group blended well in Parsons's *Ave Maria*, with Charlston adding wonderfully resonant commentary above. MacMillan's *Ave Maris Stella*, though well sung, paled in comparison to Britten's *A Hymn to the Virgin*, for which McCleery placed a quartet singing in Latin thirty feet behind a group singing in English, yet kept the two groups coordinated.

After the faraway group sang Tallis's *Euge Caeli Porta*, six singers came together for Cecilia McDowall's thoughtfully arranged *Alma Redemptoris Mater*. Sheppard's *Ave Maris Stella* offered textural variety, but it took a piece by current Master of the Queen's Music Judith Weir, her *Ave Regina Caelorum*, to properly cap the program. Full of fluttering rhythms and leaping intervals, this smart, captivating setting reminded all in attendance that the British choral tradition remains fiercely alive.

As an encore, the ensemble sang a double-choir *Jesu Redemptor* setting from Estêvão Lopes Morago, another composer who may not ring a bell for most modern listeners. To judge by the consort's affecting performance, his should become a household name.

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