

Good Company: “Weekend with Composer Ola Gjeilo”

by Jarrett Hoffman



When a composer-pianist like Ola Gjeilo lists people who have inspired them, names like Keith Jarrett, Philip Glass, and Howard Shore — all Gjeilo favorites — aren't surprising to hear.

But Dale Chihuly and Frank Gehry — a glass artist and an architect?

“I'm always inspired by artists that have an improvisational approach, which they both do,” Gjeilo said during a recent telephone conversation. “Their process seems very intuitive — kind of feeling its way through what works and what doesn't. And that's similar to my approach as a composer. It's not necessarily very cerebral or intellectual with a lot of pre-planned parameters. It usually comes out of improvising ideas and building on them — I like the fluidity of that process.”

This weekend, Good Company: A Vocal Ensemble will welcome the Norwegian-born, New York City-based Gjeilo for [two events](#) at Lakewood Presbyterian Church. First, a choral workshop on Saturday, November 3 at 3:00 pm that's free and open to anyone with an interest in choral singing techniques, Gjeilo's music, and his creative process.

Then on Sunday, November 4 at 4:00 pm for the price of a freewill offering, the Ensemble and musical director Michael Carney will present “Serenity,” a concert of Gjeilo's works for chorus, strings, and piano — including several from his latest album, [Winter Songs](#), released last year on Decca Classics.

In addition to the choir, Sunday's performers include accompanist Ruth Draper, the Amethyst Strings, and Gjeilo himself at the piano, where he'll improvise over his a cappella work *Ubi Caritas*. “It's a very suitable piece for that because it's fluid and has a chant influence,” he said. “It's not too metric and not too static, so it's easy to mess around with the tempo and have it gel together.”

In addition to jazz, Gjeilo's influences include film music, pop, and folk. He laughed when I asked him if he ever encountered push-back about his style during his studies at the Norwegian Academy of Music, the Juilliard School, and the Royal College of Music in London.

“Throughout my college years, most of my composition teachers sort of wanted to push my style in different directions,” he said, “directions that I didn't necessarily want to go. But I was very stubborn about wanting to write very tonal music — the kind of music that made me happy — so I stuck to that throughout college. I think that's really important. Not that you shouldn't do what your teachers tell you,” he said, laughing, “but only you can sound like you, right? It's something that can't really be taught.”

That in-school conflict didn't extend to improvisation, if only because it didn't play as much of a role in his compositional process at the time. “I hadn't incorporated that into my writing yet. That's something that came later.”

Another stylistic tendency of Gjeilo's music: “I like a large, lush sound, even if it's for smaller forces like the ones we'll use a lot in this concert — chamber choir, or piano and strings.” It's grand and gestural, he noted, not unlike the work of the two artists we mentioned before.



“Weekend with Ola Gjeilo” also includes a private dinner and reception with the composer on Saturday, November 3 from 6:00-9:00 pm — details in our [Concert Listings](#).

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