

**Dipping into the holidays:
chatting with Cleveland Chamber Choir
mezzo & managing director Kira McGirr**

by Jarrett Hoffman



One minute, plastic skeletons dangle from rows of porches. Next, the country fixates on turkeys. Then a menagerie of menorahs and evergreens take the scene.

In other words, the last few months can be a lot to handle, even without singing in and managing a choir — or taking care of sick and injured children. “One son has a broken arm, and my other son has pneumonia,” Kira McGirr, Cleveland Chamber Choir mezzo-soprano and the group’s new Managing Director, told me recently over the phone.

“So things are a little intense, but they’re both back to school now.”

Speedy recoveries to them. Meanwhile, McGirr and her husband, Oberlin Conservatory musicologist Charles Edward McGuire, will balance caretaking and preparations for the Choir’s first-ever holiday offerings. Their two free concerts led by artistic director Scott MacPherson will take place on Saturday, December 8 at the Church of the Covenant in Cleveland, and Sunday, December 9 at Christ Episcopal Church in Oberlin, both at 7:30 pm. McGuire will talk about the music at 6:45 pm on both dates.

“Holiday Treasures” will include music from the traditions of Hanukkah, Advent and Christmas. The majority of the program is devoted to American composers, including William Billings, Stephen Paulus, Linda Kachelmeier, and Abbie Betinis. And zooming in further on the GPS, the Choir will premiere two works commissioned from Ohio composers Corey Rubin and Scott Little.

A doctoral candidate at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, Rubin currently teaches music theory and composition at Cleveland State University, in addition to singing with the Cleveland Chamber Choir. It was October 30 — three



days after the shooting at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue — when MacPherson asked him to arrange a Hanukkah tune of his choice.

“The idea of Jewish perseverance — of surviving hardship — was very much on my mind,” Rubin writes. “This concept has been at the core of Jewish identity for millennia...”

He decided to compose a new arrangement of *Ma'oz Tzur*, whose 13th-century text describes the history of Jewish people. “Whereas many renditions of *Ma'oz Tzur* are upbeat and raucous, mine is deliberately more solemn.” He hopes the arrangement both honors the lives lost in that shooting and serves as a reminder to everyone, “Jewish or not, that we possess the strength to survive any hardship.”

Scott Little hopes to deliver a similarly positive message but in a different way. The Kent State University senior, who is studying music education, oboe, and composition, has arranged *Banu Chosech L'gareish*, a traditional Hanukkah song “that shows the power of light over darkness,” as McGuire writes in the program notes. Little himself notes, “My goal was to amplify the folk song's jubilant mood and to play off its driving rhythm.”

Two world premieres — that's no token honoring of Hanukkah, as Kira McGirr said. “It's not just *Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel*. We wanted really good pieces, and we're also taking advantage of the fact that we have such great composers in the area — and even within the choir.”

McGirr also praised Scott MacPherson's programming as a whole. “We have a really nice mix of famous pieces, like an arrangement of *Jingle Bells* and *In The Bleak Midwinter*, and pieces that aren't as well-known but are still immediately accessible and are obviously holiday pieces.”

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Another nice addition to the holiday calendar for the Choir is the opportunity to carol at the Cleveland Clinic's Children's Hospital next Wednesday, December 12. “A small group of us will be going there,” McGirr said. “They can only handle so many people. They don't want to overwhelm the patients, obviously. But giving back to the community

is something that we really believe in. We can do good work while also having a wonderful professional experience.”

She noted that in September, the Choir gave 75% of their freewill donations to the VA, donating over \$1000. “That was just awesome to be able to do that. I think it resonated with all the singers and clearly with our audience as well.”

In addition to connecting with the community, caroling of course means great music and a good time. “Especially in a small group, when it’s just one or two on a part, you can really lock in together — much like chamber music. And you’re closer to your audience — there’s no fourth wall like when the Choir is onstage. You’re in and among everyone, which is really nice.”



Speaking of connecting with audiences, McGirr also noted McGuire’s pre-concert lectures. “He’s my husband, so obviously I’m a huge fan of his,” McGirr said. “But one thing he does particularly well is talking about music in a way that’s intellectual — not dumbing it down, but also making it completely accessible to everyone in the audience. That’s very important at a time when arts organizations are trying to demystify classical music. So he’s an incredible asset to the Choir and to our audiences. I say that as a singer, and from comments that I’ve heard people make. One thing that’s telling is that the majority of the singers sit in on his pre-concert lectures. I think that’s really cool.”

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Talking about the holiday program also made for a perfect opportunity to get to know more about McGirr herself. She’s now in her second season singing in the Cleveland Chamber Choir, her first as Managing Director. “I’m just delighted to be a part of it,” she said. “It’s always been a magnificent musical experience. To be able to walk into a choir and make good music right from the first rehearsal is pretty special.”

McGirr noted that as the Choir has grown, soprano and board president Melissa Vandergriff has focused more on donor relations, fundraising, and board management. That left a void in other aspects of management — hence the position of Managing Director. Vandergriff knew it would be perfect for McGirr, who had worked in Oberlin College’s Office of Alumni Relations.

“I was doing a lot of event planning, logistics, and volunteer management,” McGirr said. “All of those skills were immediately applicable to helping out with the Choir. I’ve really enjoyed it.” At this point, it’s still a volunteer position, one that McGirr emphasized she was happy to take on.

Aside from the details of her position, the Choir represents something very personal to McGirr. Since the birth of her second child, she has largely stepped away from her work at Oberlin. She decided to get back into singing — having previously received her master’s in vocal performance at the Jacobs School at IU, and her bachelor’s at Oberlin. “I’ve been really happy to have music-making in my life again,” she said.



The Choir has also meant a lot to her socially. “It’s really a family. I’ve made some incredible friends, and we meet for reasons that have nothing to do with singing or Cleveland Chamber Choir. We genuinely like each other and want to socialize — sometimes it’s playdates, sometimes it’s parties or going out to dinner.”

McGirr said it’s been good for her to be around colleagues who are at a similar point in their lives. “A lot of us have young children,” she said. “It just creates this mutual understanding, even if it’s not something we talk about a lot.”

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