

Cleveland Chamber Choir: “The Personal Muse” (May 18)

by David Kulma



The Cleveland Chamber Choir has a bold tagline: “More than Music!” The final program of their fourth season, a collaboration with the Cleveland Composers Guild, clearly reflected this progressive mandate. Pairing living, local composers with works by British and American women, artistic director Scott MacPherson curated a delightful, satisfying

evening titled “The Personal Muse” at Fairmount Presbyterian Church on Saturday, May 18.

Bookending the first half were two works by women. Abbie Betinis’s rambunctious *Long Time Trav’ling* (2005) took three shape-note hymns and arranged them as vigorous solos sung by tenors Benjamin Hayes and Joel Kincannon amid a din of boisterous a cappella. Cecilia McDowall’s *Night Flight* (2012), on a text by Sheila Bryer, juxtaposes cello and choir to describe the first female flight across the English Channel. Featuring the robust yet singing high register of cellist Maria Flórez Areiza, the impressive three-movement work received an expansive, drama-filled performance.

In between were four works from the Guild. William F. Rayer’s *My Cell Phone* (2019) humorously explores the work’s subtitle, *A day in the life of a cell phone*. Pianist Karen Prasser deftly handled the sprightly quartal writing as the Chamber Choir sang for help and Jenna Hall Tucker wonderfully deadpanned the iPhone’s Siri.

Oberlin student Natsumi Osborn (*below*) won this season's Composers Guild Collegiate Composition Contest. Her *Autumn Reflections* (2017) sets her friend Anabelle Clark's poem *October Danger*. She lovingly captured the metaphors of wind and leaves, ending with an effective *sh*.



Rounding out the first half were two works on Latin texts. Jeffrey Quick's plangent Ash Wednesday antiphon "Emendemus in Melius" from his *Ashes* (2012) is a thoughtful plea for repentance. Frank Wiley's fascinating *Laudate Dominum* (2001), based on Psalm 148, celebrates God's creation through blistering mixed meter and austere mirror writing, beautifully handled by MacPherson and the Chamber Choir.

Two works by guild composers setting poetry by Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson opened the second half. Dawn Sonntag's lovely *The Road Not Taken* (2019) was generously contemplative, while Scott Michal's enjoyable "*Hope*" is the thing with feathers (2019) brought out the optimism in the text. Two movements from Jennifer Conner's peace-oriented *Nation's Prayer* (2008) — "Requiem" and "Dies Irae" — mixed Latin with selections from the King James Bible in a calm, beautiful musical package with clarion solos from soprano Kristine Caswelch.

Judith Bingham's *The Drowned Lovers* (1998, revised 2009) led straight into *The Bluebird*, a choral classic by Charles Villiers Stanford. Anchored by a solo from the engaging mezzo-soprano Kira McGirr (*below*), Bingham's work juxtaposes the original poem by Mary Elizabeth Coleridge with her own text on a couple drowning. The results under MacPherson's hands were dazzling.



Music from the spiritual tradition ended the program. Rosephanye Powell's *The Word Was God* (1996) is a stirring, rhythmic meditation on the opening of the Gospel of John, while Undine Smith Moore's 1953 arrangement of *Daniel, Daniel, Servant of the Lord* was a praiseful romp with forceful solos from tenor Manuel Gomez and bass Jelani Watkins.

A delightful encore brought Flórez back for the second of Anton Arensky's *Three Quartets*, Op. 57, ending the evening with gorgeous harmony in Russian.

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