

Cleveland Chamber Choir to present “Lux Caelestis” concerts this weekend

by Daniel Hathaway



To begin its fifth season, the professional singers of Scott MacPherson’s Cleveland Chamber Choir will present identical programs at St. John’s Cathedral in downtown Cleveland on Friday, November 8 at 7:30 pm, and at St. Sebastian Church in Akron on Sunday, November 10 at 5:00 pm.

“Our overall theme this season is ‘Women’s Voices Resounding,’” MacPherson said in a telephone

conversation. “A good chunk of the repertoire is by women composers and poets. And the first pair of concerts will be given in memory of my dear friend Helen Tremaine Gregory, who passed away last winter. She was a businesswoman and philanthropist who sang in my town-gown Kent Chorale.”

When MacPherson puts a concert program together, he often begins with a central piece out of which companion works spring. “The centerpiece of these programs is Timothy Kramer’s *Lux Caelestis*, a piece he wrote for me when I was at Trinity University in San Antonio,” the conductor said. “I asked him for a piece we could sing on tour in Cologne Cathedral — one that was appropriate for a watery acoustic.”

Kramer complied, and MacPherson was so taken by the piece that he encouraged Kramer to expand it into a triptych. The composer took that suggestion two steps farther and created the five-movement work that Cleveland Chamber Choir will perform this weekend.

“Each of the movements comes from a different religious tradition and is in a different language,” MacPherson said, which provides linguistic challenges for his singers. “There’s a cantorial-style Hebrew movement, followed by Buddhist, Hindu, Zoroastrian, and Roman Catholic pieces. Each of them is quite different — Tim really responds to the text at hand.” Solos will be taken by Katie Fowler, mezzo-soprano, William Hamilton and Jedidiah Rellihan, tenors, and Daniel Fridley and Mark Miller, basses.

The Kramer will come in the middle of the program. To begin, MacPherson has chosen *O virtus sapientiae* by the 12th-century abbess Hildegard von Bingen, which introduces the idea of chant-based music that permeates the concert. “That was a no-brainer, and we’ll perform it with a drone underneath the voices.”

Moving forward, the conductor decided to juxtapose the Hildegard with a modern work. Urmias Sisask’s “Oremus” is from his *Gloria Patri*, a collection of 24 hymns, all of them textless.

After that palate-cleanser, MacPherson will set the clock back to the Renaissance for Gregorio Allegri’s famous *Miserere*, which juxtaposes chant with choral verses and features solo quartet sections sung by Kristine Caswelch, Julie Myers-Pruchenski, Kira Seaton, and Corey Fowler. The soprano solo part is stratospheric. MacPherson has never had the opportunity to program the work, which was a closely-guarded specialty of the Sistine Chapel Choir, “but now I have the right choir and soloists to do it.”

The program continues with Minneapolis composer Linda Kachelmeier’s *O vos omnes*. “She used to sing with the Rose Ensemble, and we’ve done several of her pieces in the past,” MacPherson said. “Here, she voices the feelings of a grieving mother through a mezzo-soprano soloist, Kim Lauritsen.”

Another composer MacPherson has frequently programmed is Englishwoman Cecilia McDowall. “Her *Cecilia, Busy Like a Bee* is a sacred piece with unique text setting.” Anna E. White will be featured as soprano soloist.

The Franco-Flemish composer Phillippe Rogier (1561-1596), who was in the employ of Philip II of Spain, will be represented by his double-choir motet *Laudate Dominum*. That piece is one of Rogier’s few surviving works, most of his music having been destroyed in the great 1755 earthquake in Lisbon. On the recommendation of a musicologist colleague, MacPherson hunted down a microfilm

of a manuscript of the psalm setting in the library of Puebla Cathedral in Mexico and transcribed the piece himself.

After Kramer's work, the Choir will close the program with Eurydice V. Osterman's *Alleluia*, which MacPherson describes as "an uplifting, rhythmic setting with only one word of text — like similar pieces by Alan Hovhaness and Randall Thompson."

But there's still one more piece waiting in the wings — something of a planned encore. "Jocelyn Hagen's *Hands* is another wordless piece with a beautiful melody like modern chant," MacPherson said. It will feature mezzo-soprano Kira McGirr and tenor Joel Kincannon as soloists.

In a departure from its usual practice, Cleveland Chamber Choir is foregoing admission charges this weekend. "A freewill offering will be taken up at both events," MacPherson said, adding that the Choir will donate a percentage of the Sunday collection to a chosen charity. "We're now able to start doing that because of grants and other community support."

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