

Cleveland Chamber Choir at First Baptist (Dec. 7)

by Daniel Hathaway



Countering the widespread practice of giving a half-hearted nod to Hanukkah during December choral concerts, Cleveland Chamber Choir dedicated an important chunk of this year's "Holidays Old and New" programs to the Jewish Feast of Lights, which included this latest pair of annual commissions.

At First Baptist Church in Shaker Heights on Saturday, December 7, Scott MacPherson and his 24 professional singers interleaved Hanukkah music by Andrew Rindfleisch, Baruch J. Cohon, Samuel Adler, Judith Clurman, David Chase, and chorister Corey K. Rubin with pairs of old and new versions of Christmas pieces.

The concert began with a plainsong setting and an arrangement by C.L. Alwes of *Resonet in laudibus*, a tune that with German text became a dialogue between Mary and Joseph (and women and men) in Hieronymus Praetorius' *Joseph lieber, Joseph mein*.

The Medieval Marian hymn *Alma redemptoris Mater* appeared both in the clear, hefty polyphonic lines of Johannes Ockeghem's motet and Cecilia McDowall's six-part motet written in tribute to the earlier work, but in a variety of styles.

Elizabeth Poston's pure, C-major setting of *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*, an anonymous poem from an 18th-century New England commonplace book, served as

an entremet at midpoint, its ravishingly simple melody beautifully sung by Anna O'Connell, followed by a fascinating, layered postlude.

The final set of Christmas pairings involved two settings of *O magnum mysterium* — the stark but moving Spanish Renaissance version by Tomás Luis de Victoria, and a modern, harmonically ecstatic one by Morten Lauridsen.

Having responded with equal sensitivity to contrasting styles of the old and new Christmas settings, Cleveland Chamber Choir shifted into celebratory mode with the Hanukkah music.

Andrew Rindfleisch's *Menorah Blessings* (a premiere) are understated settings of three conjoined candle-blessing prayers from the first night of the Festival, set in the low range of voices, "coloring the text in such a way as to sound bathed in candlelight." That image came across beautifully, juxtaposed with Blanche Chass's exuberant setting for men's voices of the traditional chant *Hanerot Halalu*.

Samuel Adler's *A Song of Hanukkah*, a rhythmic arrangement of a folk melody, was closely followed by the premiere of Corey K. Rubin's klezmer-infused arrangement of *Mi Yimalel*, enlivened by Julie Myers-Pruchenski's tambourine and soprano Kristine Caswelch's arresting, stratospheric cadenza at the end.

The program came to a conclusion with Jocelyn Hagen's raucous arrangement of *Deck the Hall*, Joan Szymko's pretty version of *Stille Nacht* featuring flutist Liz Root and violinist Marina Ziegler, and Lana Walter's energetic *Noel, Noel!* MacPherson always has an encore waiting in the wings, this time an unabashedly popular one: Andy Williams' 1963 holiday hit, *The Most Wonderful Time of the Year*.

Photo by Elisa Vietri Photography.

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