

Quire Cleveland: Carols for Quire X (Dec. 21)

by David Kulma



In Paris, 1534, Pierre Attaignant published a book of motets that utilized the aptly named “O Antiphons.” His *Motetorum Liber Book 7* includes six Advent antiphons, which are traditionally sung at Vespers from December 17 through 23, one per evening. Derived from the prophecies of Isaiah, each begins with “O” and names a specific attribute of the Messiah — *Sapientia* (Wisdom), *Adonai* (Lord), *Radix Jesse* (Root of Jesse),

Clavis David (Key of David), *Oriens* (Daystar), *Rex Gentium* (*King of Nations*), and *Emmanuel* (God with us). They are best known in the hymn “O Come O Come Emmanuel,” which brings them all together to create one beautiful Christmas carol.

It made perfect sense for artistic director Jay White and Quire Cleveland to structure their “Carols for Quire X” program around the “O Antiphon” motets, mixing them with similarly themed English carols. To provide context, each motet was preceded by the matching original Gregorian chant antiphon. I attended the second concert on Saturday, December 21 at the beautiful, domed Our Lady of Peace Church just off Shaker Square.

This opening program of the ensemble’s 12th season — the second with White at the helm — showed off Quire’s stylistic range, clarity of tone, and impeccable intonation. The sixteen professionals blended miraculously, singing without vibrato, and gave off ample flowing energy in the vibrant acoustics of this large Roman Catholic church.

The various chants were seamless beauties no matter the number of people singing. White drew out supple rhythms that maintained a clear flow. Each chant began with the opening name sung by a soloist, who signaled the start of the matching motet with the same opening.

Utilizing the 2017 edition of Attaingnant's book by Mick Swithinbank, Quire regularly changed formation as the number of parts ranged from four to six. The early 16th century finds polyphony full of triads, and Quire made them sound like resonant jewels. Each motet was structured in three sections, with the antiphon text divided between the first two. The final textless sections were sung gorgeously on "ah," the few pungent dissonances along the way making the final consonance all the more glorious.

Equally lovely were the carols, ranging in time from Michael Praetorius's *Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming* (1609) to the 20th century. The juxtaposition of Renaissance modality with its modern brother gave the concert a consistent flavor. Ralph Vaughan Williams's arrangement of the English carol "The truth from above" ends each verse with a surprising, yet beautiful major chord. The various arrangements by David Willcocks were deliciously effective, while Peter Wishart's *Alleluya, a new work* bounced joyously. Quire sounded magnificent throughout, singing with crystalline English diction.

But the highlights of the concert were the two communal carols: *O come, all ye faithful* and *Hark! The herald-angels sing*. With elaborate descants from Quire's sopranos, we all sang, filling the large church with a joyful noise. Provided with four-part notation in the program, some of us sang in harmony as well. It's hard to imagine a more delightful evening in collective song.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 7, 2020.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)