

## Cleveland Chamber Choir: “A Season of Thanksgiving”

by Jarrett Hoffman



This year and last, Thanksgiving has taken on an additional meaning, something that the Cleveland Chamber Choir will recognize in a free program to open its seventh season on Saturday, November 6 at 7:00 pm at St. Ambrose Parish in Brunswick.

Celebrating life and gratitude as a way of recognizing all that musicians and audiences have gone through over the last eighteen months, “A Season of Thanksgiving” brings together sacred music by Kerry Andrew, Gwyneth Walker, Kevin Allen, Josef Gabriel Rheinberger, Susan LaBarr, and Jose Elberdin, as well as arrangements by Sarah Quartel, Mark Butler, and Kevin S. Foster. (Click [here](#) to learn about CCC’s safety practices related to COVID-19.)

The Choir will be represented by an octet made up of sopranos Jackie Josten and Anna E. White, altos Katie Fowler and Kira McGirr, tenors Joel Kincannon and Peter Wright, and basses Jelani Watkins and Corey Fowler — CCC’s assistant conductor, who will also be directing the ensemble.

On that note, when I reached Fowler last Friday during a break in his teaching at Roosevelt High School, where he is Director of Choirs, we began our conversation on the topic of leading a group while also singing within it.

“We have our first rehearsal tomorrow, but I’ve been in situations like that before, and it is a little tricky,” Fowler said. He pointed out that much of the music on this program is in SATB form, and since there’s another bass in Jelani Watkins, Fowler can take a moment here and there to just listen, and all the parts will still be present.

“It definitely is a juggling act, but you invite the other singers in on the leadership process as well — if they hear something they want to talk about, they can be very open about bringing it up so we can fix it.”

While Fowler will in a sense be “conducting,” it will look different from what most people imagine from that word. “It won’t be so much with hand gestures,” he said, bringing up the example of British vocal ensemble VOCES8. “They have a conductor who’s one of the singers, and he will start each piece, but really it is a collective effort through eye contact and body language. That’s a beautiful thing about small-ensemble singing that I love — it’s great to have the feeling that you’re working as a team to lead the music together.”

From there, we launched into the topic of programming. “When I sat down and started picking out the repertoire, one thing I wanted to keep at the forefront of my mind was the makeup of our composers,” Fowler said. Inclusivity, in several forms, was a key word for him — the program includes female, male, Black, white, American, Canadian, English, Spanish, German-Liechtensteiner, living, and dead composers and arrangers.

Stylistically, the theme of gratitude is expressed in several ways. Homophonic, hymn-like music — “a very grounded, foundational choral sound,” Fowler said — is well represented, as in Gwyneth Walker’s *A Prayer of Compassion*.

Then there’s the highly polyphonic arrangement by Mark Butler, which brings together two congregational songs popular in African American churches: *Down Through the Years* and *I Thank You Jesus*. “It’s very call-and-response in style,” Fowler said of the arrangement, also noting its aspects of gospel and concert spirituals.

The closer, Josu Elberdin’s *Cantate Domino*, brings in an element of compound meter, but more importantly is just what you’d want in the mood of a finale: “very upbeat as we wrap up this message of thanksgiving,” Fowler said. “Of course that’s the time of year we’re in, but also given everything with COVID and now being able to sing together, what a great message to end with: ‘Sing to the Lord — *cantate Domino*.’”

Speaking of those five capital letters we’ve all come to know so well over the past eighteen months, Fowler was appointed assistant conductor of Cleveland Chamber Choir not long after the initial lockdown went into place. That meant that his first year in his new role revolved around the creation of virtual performances that integrated individual recordings to form a choir.



“Helping out with that process made up a lot of my duties last year, and hopefully we never have to do that again,” he said with a laugh. “I feel so honored to lead this concert because I can really dig into the artistic side — choosing the repertoire and working with the singers. The position has a lot more of that now, while last year was more of the business side — putting stuff together and getting it out for our patrons and concertgoers.”

Fowler is also the man behind CCC’s graphic design, though that’s nothing new. “Since the first season, I’ve done almost all of the graphic work, online and print,” he said. “It’s something that I’ve always really enjoyed doing — I always had kind of an eye for visual things — and I learned the different software on my own.”

My interview with Fowler happened to be on the Friday before Halloween — a sanctioned “dress-up day” at Roosevelt High. His costume? The Spartan Cheerleader outfit that Will Ferrell made famous alongside Cheri Oteri on *Saturday Night Live* in the ‘90s.

Some of his students didn’t get the reference and needed to be educated with clips of those sketches, while others, particularly among the juniors and seniors, said something along the lines of, “Oh my gosh, that’s awesome,” Fowler recalled.

The perfect reaction from a teenager, or anyone really.

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