

Cleveland Chamber Choir: “Carols Around the World” (Dec. 11)

by Peter Feher



“Carols Around the World” doesn’t quite capture the breadth of the Cleveland Chamber Choir’s holiday program. The group sang more than just Christmas music on December 11 at Old Stone Church.

Artistic director Scott MacPherson planned it this way, crafting a concert that combined seasonal tunes with pieces for any time of the year to deliver a larger theme of

gratitude and thanksgiving — not restricted to the holidays.

Two new works by Cleveland-based composer and CCC baritone Corey K. Rubin bridged the gap between festive and universal. Rubin’s setting of *Three Hanukkah Songs*, which the Choir has been premiering one movement at a time since 2018, brings out the melancholy in normally upbeat music.

The newest arrangement in the set, “Sevivon,” which had its world premiere Saturday, inserts little blips into the melody to emulate the wobbly spinning of a dreidel. Similar dissonances color the other songs in the triptych, from a clashing half-step before a dramatic pause in “Ma’oz Tzur” to pitch bends across the ensemble in the finale, “Mi Yimalel.”

These devices of musical fragmentation received even more of the focus in Rubin’s second premiere on the program. Setting a poem by Jean E. Taddonio (who was in attendance), *See More* takes its text seriously, finding inspiration for its fragmented structure in the lines “hope can be found / in the cracks.” Optimism despite obstacles

was perhaps the spirit for the evening, with the 30-plus vocalists masked but singing together again.

CCC was on familiar choral ground with a trio of not-strictly holiday pieces. Josquin des Prez's *Ave Maria ... virgo serena* had each section of the Choir singing confidently and independently, then lining up for a couple of unison phrases at the end. The ensemble found the jolliness in the descending sequences of Bach's *Lobet den Herrn alle Heiden* — where they were joined by string quintet and organ — and found the drama in the clanging sounds of Jonathan Dove's *Ring Out, Wild Bells*, helped along by MacPherson's precise and highly rhythmic conducting.

The musical variety took off with the carols from around the world. A woodwind trio accompanied the French favorite *Il est né le divin enfant*, and an arrangement of the Polish carol *Lulajże, Jezuniu* called for some of the softest vocalizing of the evening — just humming. African drums, plus other percussion picked up by members of the choir, drove the concert's closer, the Nigerian carol *Betelehemu*.

The Christmas stage was set with contemporary choral works. All the traditional trappings of a holiday classic could be found in Andrew Rindfleisch's *Christmas Carol (Ring Out, Ye Bells)*, another world premiere from a local composer. Amy Broadbent's *Wartime Christmas*, sensitively led by CCC assistant conductor Jelani Watkins, was elegiac and sometimes eerie.

Watkins also headed the ensemble in an arrangement of *Silent Night* which pitched some of the basses in an impressively low register. Another familiar tune receiving clever treatment was *Deck the Hall*. This version by Joyce Hagen, interspersed with hoots and peals of laughter, evoked a raucous holiday party — and maybe in another year, the start of a singalong.

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