

Quire Cleveland in “Mary’s Song” at St. Ignatius of Antioch (Dec. 4)

by Daniel Hathaway



Emerging from a dispiriting silence of twenty months, Quire Cleveland raised its eighteen voices in bright music written in honor of the Virgin Mary on Saturday evening, December 4. The third and last performance of its program “Mary’s Song” took place in the impressive, marble-columned nave and resonant acoustic of St. Ignatius of Antioch Church on Cleveland’s West Side.

“Mary’s Song” refers to the *Magnificat* (“My soul doth magnify the Lord”), sung by the soon-to-be mother of Jesus in response to the message the angel Gabriel delivered to her in the Gospel according to Luke. The text has been set countless times by composers in all eras, largely because the *Magnificat* is one of the invariable texts in the daily service of Vespers, as well as its Anglican relative, Choral Evensong.

Quire artistic director Jay White ingeniously anchored his program with four strikingly different settings of Mary’s Song — a vast, sprawling polyphonic setting by pre-Reformation composer Robert Fayrfax, a terse version by Robert Parsons from his *First Service* that would please any Puritan with its transparent text declamation, an elegant work for eight voices by the great polyphonist Giovanni da Palestrina, and a charming Iberian version by Tomás Luis de Victoria decked out with dance-like sections in triple meter.

The first half of the program was filled out with the 13th-century Basque Carol, *Gabriel’s Message*, and the English *Cherry Tree Carol* — the version that treats Joseph as a loving spouse rather than a jealous husband who receives his comeuppance in an episode with a fruit tree. The second half mirrored the first, with Elizabeth Poston’s irresistible C-major carol *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*, and David Willcocks’ lovely arrangement of *Silent Night*.

In the middle of both halves, the audience was invited to sing — or hum — along with Quire, first on *Once in Royal David’s City*, then later on *Joy to the World*, with the members of Quire decking the carol melodies with rich boughs of harmony.

The ensemble emerged from its COVID-imposed sabbatical sounding fresh and seemingly none the worse for months of choral exile. Balances were well-calculated and intonation true. More exaggerated diction would have paid off in this particular venue where words sometimes swam under the surface of the wet acoustic.

And the program would have profited from canning the “Interval” — announced for ten minutes, but doubled because of long lines at St. Ignatius’ few comfort stations. The arc of this musical program would have worked fine even without a planned interruption.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 7, 2021.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)