

Quire Cleveland: “Resonant Glory” at St. John’s Cathedral (May 15)

by Daniel Hathaway



Of the three venues that Quire Cleveland’s artistic director Jay White chose for the ensemble’s “Music for Grand Spaces” trilogy, none fits the description quite so aptly as the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in downtown Cleveland. It was there that Quire opened its series of programs designed for churches with a resonant acoustic on Friday, May 13 with a splendid selection of pieces.

You wouldn’t expect that acoustic from a glance at the nave, which is wide and long, but not especially lofty. But when I guest conducted a local amateur choir and professional orchestra in Beethoven’s *Mass in C* there a few years back, during the first rehearsal we released the final chord of the “Gloria” and listened in astonishment for the next several seconds. The sound continued to roll down the space like the big wave that surfers dream about.

Quire's 80-minute program deployed its 17 singers in various configurations for a sonic tour of pieces written for specific choirs and spaces, including Notre-Dame de Paris, the Allerheiligen-Hofkirche in Munich, St. Mark's in Venice, St. Apollinare in Rome, the Convento de Carmen in Mexico City, Leipzig's Thomaskirche, Trinity College Chapel in Cambridge, and Westminster Cathedral — not the Abbey — in London.

A veteran of worldwide choral tours, having sung with Chanticleer for eight seasons, White knows how to get a modest number of human voices to move the air in a big church. That begins with suppressing vibrato in favor of a more direct and focused tone that can travel from larynx to ear without losing sonic energy, and Quire produced a volume of sound worthy of an ensemble several times its size on Friday.

Clarity was another matter entirely, and the transmission of detail depended largely on the skill of the composer. Andrea Gabrieli's *Benedicam Dominum* came across as a tangle of sonorities, while his nephew Giovanni used double-choir techniques in his *Hodie completi sunt* to write a true dialogue whose musical outlines remained clear.

The most striking pieces came in the second half. Juan de Lienas was responsible for an energetic, madrigal-like setting of *Credidi*, and J.S. Bach's motet *Komm, Jesu, komm* — probably the best-known work of the evening — flourished in the back-and-forth tradeoffs between the double choirs.

Perhaps the least-known piece was the most impressive: C.V. Stanford's festive *Magnificat* brought an extended burst of sheer joy to the penultimate slot of the evening. Then the "Gloria" from Vaughan Williams' *Mass in g* provided a satisfying ending to a cleverly-designed playlist. With its more frequent dialogues between the two choirs, plus RVW's intentionally archaic modal harmonies, it struck a lovely balance between the historic and the modern.

An odd sonic distortion (a left-open mic?) unfortunately distracted attention from the first couple of pieces on the program, including Lassus' steamy setting of *Osculetur me* (words from the reliably erotic *Song of Solomon*). That went away in time for Victoria's chaste *Salve Regina*, which White dedicated to mothers on Mother's Day weekend.

This was a tricky program to bring together in a week's worth of rehearsals following a nearly two-year hiatus, but Quire Cleveland rose to the challenge, sounding fit and grateful for the opportunity to lift their voices together in a live concert once again.

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