

Cleveland Consort of Voices at Church of the Saviour (Feb. 12)

by Daniel Hathaway



Cleveland has become something of a hotbed for chamber music, with a winter season sponsored by the Cleveland Chamber Music Society, two summer series curated by ChamberFest Cleveland and Encore Chamber Music Institute, and an orchestra famous for playing with the precision and nuance of a 90-piece string quartet.

What has been missing is vocal chamber music — the one-singer-on-a-part format that reaches such a high level in such European ensembles as Voces8 and the King’s Singers. But now enter the Cleveland Consort of Voices, a new group organized and led by Oberlin musicology professor and Collegium conductor Steven Plank.

On Sunday, February 12 in the French Gothic nave of the Church of the Saviour in Cleveland Heights, Plank’s eight colleagues delivered an hour-long program that began with exquisitely detailed singing of sixteenth-century and modern motets and part-songs by William Byrd, Luigi Molfino, Kim Arnesen, Thomas Campion, C.H.H. Parry, R.L. Pearsall, Ed Newton-Rex, and Paul Mealor, and culminated in a stunning performance of J.S. Bach’s motet *Singet dem Herrn*.

The singers demonstrated fine intonation and blend in Byrd’s *Ave verum corpus*, pointed up the respective virtues of settings of *O sacrum convivium* by Molfino and Arnesen and of *Never weather-beaten sail* by Campion and Parry, and doubtless won new friends for Pearsall’s dreamy *Lay a Garland* (among those who already know his *In dulci jubilo*

from King's Lessons and Carols), and Newton-Rex's *Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep* (for its remarkable chord progressions).

And though there are plenty of settings of *Ave Maria, gratia plena* out there, it was delightful to hear an expressive modern version by Welsh composer Paul Mealor.

Plank, who commented frequently on the pieces to give his singers breaks, noted that they would probably appreciate longer remarks before launching into the Bach motet — an enterprise fully as athletic as that evening's Super Bowl game.

In fact, they seemed not to need any extra repose. Sandra Simon, Emily Stauch, Elizabeth Frey, Madelyn Hasebein, Brian Skoog, Joel Kincannon, Luca Cantone, and Brian Wacker had stamina to spare as they fugued their way through Bach's counterpoint, making dense textures transparent, spinning out tireless melismas, and looking like it was all great, effortless fun.

The Cleveland Consort of Voices is a terrific addition to our concert scene. Let's hope that we hear more from them soon.

Photo: an earlier performance at St. James Church in Lakewood

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