

Composers Guild joins Cleveland Chamber Choir for Joint Concert

by Daniel Hathaway



On Sunday, April 4 at 4 pm in Drinko Hall at Cleveland State University, Cleveland Composers Guild will join Cleveland Chamber Choir for a program that combines new works by Northeast Ohio choral composers with masterworks from the last five centuries.

I recently met up on Zoom with Chamber Choir interim music director Gregory Ristow and Composers Guild chair Margi Griebeling-Haigh to learn more about this Sunday's concert.

Daniel Hathaway: It takes two to tango, but usually when two organizations end up collaborating, the original idea came from one of them. Who instigated this project?

Margi Griebeling-Haigh: Neither of us was in a decision-making capacity when the idea first came up — which I believe was in a brainstorming session for the 2019 season. Probably somebody said, 'Hey, I've heard that Cleveland Chamber Choir is terrific. Let's work with them.' So I'm pretty sure we approached them for the first concert.

Also, every year we hold a collegiate composition contest, and we decided that year to make writing a choral piece a requirement because young composers seem to go the instrumental route first. That year, we had only one choral submission, but it turned out to be a stellar piece that the Choir really liked, so they programmed it with half a concert of Guild works. After the Pandemic, the idea for this particular concert was revived by both sides.

Gregory Ristow: I actually sang and played piano in that 2019 concert. This time around, we received anonymous submissions, then a three-person panel from Chamber Choir met and picked half a concert's worth of music from that. At that point, we had to decide how to arrange the pieces on the program. We decided to craft a thematic program around the submissions that I think has turned out really beautifully. "Deep Like a River: Songs of Heavenly Natures" is organized as a journey through the seasons. It was just delightful that it ended up working that way.

DH: Greg, take us through the program, which begins with a piece by Chen Yi.

GR: We've paired Chen Yi's *Spring Dreams* with Eric Charnofsky's *Spring*. Eric is a Guild member and a really fine pianist. I'm particularly excited by this pairing for a number of reasons. The Chen Yi is very aleatoric and just has this feeling of freedom throughout. But largely, she's working within a pentatonic collection.

The Charnofsky is an ebullient, boisterous piece, but harmonically, he works a lot in what we call a quartal / quintal style. If you stack four or five of these intervals on top of one another, you end up with a pentatonic collection. So there's this really cool harmonic concurrence between those two pieces that I think will make a beautiful concert opener.

Then two movements from Jonathan Dove's *The Passing of the Year*, transition us into summer and Inna Onofrei's *Rain in Summer*, a gorgeous, atmospheric piece without much text, so the interest becomes much more about the use of the voices to create the effect of a beautiful summer rain.

Then we go into nature, and here we have scheduled Cara Haxo's *Sea Grass*, a love song of sorts, and then Gabriel Fauré's *Le Ruisseau*, a fun piece about a stream that falls in love with the shadow of a flower on its surface and says, 'Come and join your grace to my suave flair. Let me carry you away to the deep ocean!'

MG-H: How French!

GR: But the flower says, 'O no, I don't think so. I have roots, and you are just passing by.' Then comes Margaret Bond's setting of *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, a beautiful setting of one of the first poems Langston Hughes ever wrote.

You may know that Randall Thompson wrote *Frostiana*, a beautiful cycle of six settings of poems by Robert Frost.

DH: I actually sang in Randall's 80th birthday concert in college when he premiered the orchestrations of *Frostiana*, so I know those quite well. But I think it's fascinating that in the section of the program titled "New Frostiana," you have one Frost poem set by Thompson, and two other texts from that cycle by other composers.

GR: Jacqueline Josten, one of our sopranos, is going to sing Margaret Bonds' setting of "The Pasture," and Geoffrey Peterson, one of our Guild composers, wrote a beautiful *a cappella* setting of "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" for mixed voices in an almost languorous tempo. Nearly a third of the piece is a very meditative reflection on the last line of the text, "And miles to go before I sleep." For me, it's always fun to see how different composers approach the same text.

In the next section, "Songs of Adoration" are generally Christian celebratory texts, beginning with Mark Nowakowski's *Ave Maria*, which we're pairing with Vincente Lusitano's *Ave, Spes Nostra*. He's a recently rediscovered African Portuguese composer of the high Renaissance.

Then Pavel Tchesnokov's *Salvation is Created*, is probably the most famous piece on the program — and three of our basses have the low notes needed to perform it. We'll end with William F. Rayer's *Gloria*, an upbeat piece that will leave you humming fragments on the way home, and one of *Three Choral Benedictions* by Amy Beach, a one-minute piece. Oberlin musicology professor Charles Edward McGuire will talk about the program before the performance..

DH: Do you have anything to add to that, Margi?

MG-H: No, but now I wish that I had submitted something! I will say that I have worked with many groups over many years now, and Cleveland Chamber Choir has been 100% delightful. On the spot I can't say enough about how refreshing the Choir has been.

GR: It's such a joy for us to work with the Composers Guild.

MG-H: Only three compositions on the program were premiered before 1900, and both men and women are very well represented. So are younger composers, two of whom on this program joined the guild during the Pandemic.

This whole season for the Composers Guild has been designated "Celebrating the Year of the Voice, with an art song concert in October, a vocal chamber music concert in January, now we're having choral music, our junior concert will feature about half

of our young students as singers, and we're ending the season with opera scenes in conjunction with Cleveland Chamber Symphony, which is a big deal for us.

Although the concert at CSU is not a ticketed event and donations will not be received at the door, both the [Cleveland Composers Guild](#) and [Cleveland Chamber Choir](#) welcome contributions on their websites (follow the preceding hyperlinks).

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