

**Cleveland Chamber Choir:
“Holidays from the Iberian Peninsula” (Dec. 16)**

by Kevin McLaughlin



Holidays from the
Iberian Peninsula

A gorgeous and frequently surprising offering of Christmas and Hanukkah music from Renaissance Spain and Portugal was the focus of Cleveland Chamber Choir’s program “Holidays from the Iberian Peninsula” on Saturday, December 16 in First Baptist Church of Greater Cleveland.

Voices and instruments resonated in this grand space without losing focus. For people who wonder why the Renaissance cultivated an unadorned vocal style that did not favor

thick vibrato, this concert offered an explanation: the music of the era was conceived for spaces like this one, where voices resound naturally, and words come through clearly. Under the direction of Artistic Director Gregory Ristow, tempos took on a certain speech-like freedom that gave rightful primacy to the words. The projection and translation of texts above the stage also helped to convey meaning.

The two ensaladas (literally musical salads) by Matteo Flecha el Viejo — *La Bomba* at the beginning and *El Fuego* near the end — may have stolen the show. These musically varied, nail-biting dramas about ship and fire rescue as metaphors for salvation kept you on the edge of your pew. Some extra-musical shtick added to the fun in both works: guitarist Danur Kvilhaug in *La Bomba*, standing up to “tune” his instrument while the ensemble showed consternation behind him, and choir members going on about, then imitating a too-flat bagpipe in *El Fuego*.

This professional vocal ensemble made every transition on the program without effort, from secular to sacred. They sang the popular carols, *Riu, Riu, Chiu* and *Fum, Fum, Fum*, with obvious delight, even as they applied the same performance scruples as in the more serious works.

The motet *Praeter rerum seriem* for eight voices, by Afro-Portuguese composer Vicente Lusitano, was a welcome discovery for this listener. The indebtedness to Josquin des Prez's smooth treatment of multiple voices was identifiable, but the accumulated tonal loveliness, sounding particularly rich and blended in this space, seemed to sneak up on you.

Two Hanukkah selections came early. The first, *Mi Zeh Y'Maleil*, based on a traditional Sephardic melody sung by Moroccan Jews, allowed for some fine solo singing by Dominic Aragon, who brought joy and celebration into the room. The second, a setting of Psalm 118 by Salamone Rossi, was a highpoint.

Rossi has two reputations. One is for writing skillful vocal and instrumental music of the late Renaissance and early Baroque, the other for being a Jewish composer in a Christian milieu. His deft setting of Psalm 118 renders absurd whatever astonishment there may have been. The Hebrew text, conventionally read right-to-left, is transliterated as divided syllables by Rossi, and set in lovely (left-to-right) six-voice polyphony. It all sounded very Italianate. You almost wouldn't have realized the language shift if you hadn't read about it ahead of time.

Two great works by Tomás Luis de Victoria, both named *O Magnum Mysterium* ("O great mystery"), adorned the second half. The first, a motet from 1572, sets a sublime Latin text from Christmas Vespers. The second, a parody mass from 1592, is based on the theme of the motet. Individual lines managed to interlace and distinguish themselves in both works, as did the rich blend of voices, clear pronunciation of words, and controlled volume. The motet's extended "Alleluia" may have been a foretaste of heaven.

When Ristow wasn't leading, Assistant Conductor Peter Wright shone a light on the music's integrity (*Mi Zeh Y'maleil*). The instrumental band — Ellen Sauer, recorder, Danur Kvilhaug, plucked instruments, Luke Rinderknecht, percussion, Yäel Senamaud, viola, and David Ellis, cello — made a joyful sound.

Charles Edward McGuire, Professor of Musicology at Oberlin College and Conservatory, offered valuable commentary in his chock-full pre-concert talk and printed program notes.

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