

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: Chanticleer to open 75th Season

by Mike Telin



In 1949 a small group of like-minded individuals came together to bring ensembles of the highest quality to Cleveland for chamber music performances. And thus, the Cleveland Chamber Music Society was born.

On Tuesday, September 24 at 7:30 pm at The Cultural Arts Center at Disciples Church, CCMS will launch its 75th anniversary

season with a concert by the celebrated all-male vocal ensemble Chanticleer. “Music of a Silent World,” will feature Majel Connery’s *The Rivers are Our Brothers*, a new arrangement of Tom Petty’s *Wildflowers*, Lawrence’s *The Weather*, and *I miss you like I miss the trees* by the ensemble’s composer-in-residence Ayanna Woods. A gala reception will follow the performance. Tickets are available [online](#).

I caught up with tenor and assistant music director Matthew Mazzola and baritone Matthew Knickman on Zoom and began our conversation by asking why they are excited about this nature inspired program.

Matthew Mazzola: This is my eighth season in the group and I can honestly say that this is my favorite program that we’ve ever done. It has never gotten old for me. It gives voice to the natural world — rocks, trees, rivers — things that have sound, but not a voice.

We commissioned our friend Majel Connery to make arrangements of her song cycle *The Rivers Are Our Brothers*. Each song has a title such as I am a river, I am a tree, I am a cloud. It’s a fun and interesting way to let nature speak.

MT: Do the voices have a message to deliver?



MM: (pictured left) Every element in nature definitely has a voice. For instance, in “I am the air,” the air has two sides. One is more intense saying “I am tornado, I am hurricane.” There’s also a part of air that scatters seeds along the ground.

Matthew Knickman: She adds a lot of anthropomorphic qualities to all of these things in our world. When you think of trees, clouds, rivers, you might think of traveling down a river in a canoe or flying in a plane. We take all of that for granted, not realizing they have a voice, they have feelings, and they have emotions.

Majel was inspired by a speech given by Chief Seattle in the Washington area. The story goes that he went to a town meeting to plead to the Westerners to respect nature.

I think what stands out on this program is that we’re a choral ensemble, so many of our pieces are for multiple voices singing at the same time. But in this program there are a lot of soloists. Matt is featured quite heavily and rightfully so — he has one of the most beautiful voices you will ever hear.

I think that people coming to the concert will be deeply moved. It’s quite a roller coaster of emotions. Sometimes we’re belting, sometimes we’re screaming, and sometimes we’re just singing ooo. So it’s a really interesting piece.

MT: It sounds like a fascinating piece. And by what I’ve been reading, it appears as though it’s been well received by audiences.

MK: It’s very accessible. You can walk out of concerts humming the tunes.

MT: What else is on the program?

MM: There will be some of Max Reger’s *Ten Songs for Male Chorus*. And that text is also about loving nature. There’s Kurt Weill’s *Lost in the Stars*.

There will also be some Chanticleer classics like *Shenandoah* and Joni Mitchell’s *Both Sides Now*. And we have some new arrangements by current members of the ensemble.

There's Hoagy Carmichael's *Stardust*, by the band Lawrence's *The Weather*, and Tom Petty's *Wildflowers*.

MT: Switching topics, how do you keep the legacy going for an ensemble that started back in 1978?



MK (pictured left): It's really a day-by-day process. We do have conversations about what it means to be here in 2024 versus 1978.

But musically, we started off mainly singing Renaissance and Medieval music — we rarely sang a jazz piece. In the 80s some barbershop quartets were added and when Joseph Jennings, our music director emeritus joined the group, he began adding the repertoire that we are well-known for, which are more contemporary pieces, along with jazz and gospel.

And our former interim assistant music director, Matt Oltman, shepherded us into pop music realms, and that's why we're singing music of Queen and Joni Mitchell. So I think the legacy is about honoring the past and exploring new things.

I don't know if we would have performed "Music of a Silent World" twenty years ago. So Tim Keeler is keeping the group evolving.

MT: Matt, would you like to add anything?

MM: As I said, this is my eighth year with the group and it's a unique situation in that there are only about 120 former members, so that's only 120 people in the world who really know what we go through day in and day out. We try to keep in contact with them and share stories of the past and think about how we can bring that into what we do so we can continue to honor that legacy.

MT: Matthew, how long have you been with the group?

MK: This is the start of my 14th season. I'm not the longest-tenured member currently in the group. One of our altos is starting his 19th year, and the alto next to him is starting his 18th.

MT: I'm picking up on your saying "next to," and it's reminding me very much of a stand partner situation in an orchestra.

MK: It's very much like that. We number ourselves one through twelve, going from the highest to the lowest voice. And then we have that I call swing chairs.

So I sit on the top end of the baritone section and to my left is the lowest tenor of the tenor section — Andrew Van Allsburg. And a lot of times, if there's a three-part split in the tenor section, Andy and I might be singing that lower tenor part. So we do call ourselves stand partners. And the bass baritones on my right, he's the stand partner with the bass who is next to him.

In fact, I'm still good friends with the person Andy replaced and when we text our nicknames are SB — stand buddy.

MT: This is for both of you. Why did you want to become a member of Chanticleer and what has kept you with them for so many years?

MM: I grew up in Houston, Texas, and we're very lucky to have great choirs, bands, and orchestras. So I grew up singing. I went to the University of Houston, and during my time there was when I heard my first Chanticleer piece — Biebl's *Ave Maria*. If you've seen a copy of the music, it says Chanticleer right on the front. So I listened to them all through college and after that I sent an audition tape in hopes of becoming a member, and it worked out.

But what's kept me here are programs like "The Rivers Are Our Brothers." When I joined I wondered if there would be enough variety in the group, because you're singing with the same eleven people all the time. But I've found that I really love that. So many times in the choral world you fly in for a gig, and then you fly out. But it's a different experience to have the same people around you, singing together day in and day out.

MT: And Matthew?

MK: I've been singing since I was in third grade. I grew up in the Episcopal Church, so I did the Anglican boychoir tradition. But I discovered Chanticleer when I was a senior in high school when I was given their *Wondrous Love* CD, which is one of their best — your readers should definitely listen to it.

When I discovered them I thought, oh my gosh, this is the professional version of what I grew up doing and they sound incredible. At the age of seventeen I told myself, that's

what I want to do with my life. And for the next six years I tried to gain as many skills as possible so I would be attractive to Chanticleer. I auditioned about three times before I got in, so persistence pays off.

And what keeps me here? Imagine you're a basketball player and you're on a team with LeBron James, and for years you get to hang out with him — why would you leave that?

When Matt joined and I heard him sing, I thought, I'm sitting in the back listening to my colleague nail it night after night. It's so beautiful and I get to be a part of it. It's like being a fan onstage and I love that.

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