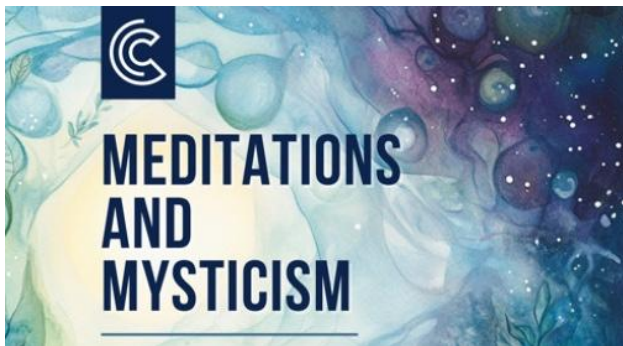


Cleveland Chamber Choir begins 10th season with Meditations and Mysticism

by Mike Telin



In a recent Zoom conversation, Gregory Ristow said, “We talk so much about how music heals. And that idea provided me with threads into how composers engaged with the notion of music as a centering device — as a way of finding one’s own place in the world or observing the broader context of the world beyond oneself.”

On Saturday, October 26 at 7:00 pm at Trinity Cathedral Ristow will lead the Cleveland Chamber Choir in “Meditations and Mysticism.” The program celebrates the healing power of music. The concert, presented in partnership with the award-winning mental health program, Ghetto Therapy, will launch the ensemble’s tenth anniversary season.

The program will be repeated on Sunday at 4:00 pm at First Lutheran Church in Lorain. Oberlin College & Conservatory Professor Charles Edward McGuire will present a pre-concert talk 45 minutes prior to each performance. Click [here](#) to register for a “pay what you will” ticket.

Although Ristow has been thinking about the program’s musical side for at least two years, the emotional and spiritual side has been with him much longer. “Growing up, my family went to Presbyterian church services, but we also went to Hindu services. So as a child I was surrounded by the idea of meditation — sitting in silence to find one’s own place and to feel oneself among the broader world.”

Given the subject, it’s fitting that music by Hildegard von Bingen will open the program. “*O virtus sapiente* is one of her more famous chants,” Ristow said. “From what we know of her, she would sit and feel musical and mystical revelations come to her, which then became her music. So her music quite literally came from this place of — if I find a still, quiet place, what do I hear? Then can I channel that into something that everyone can hear?”



Ristow said that Shruthi Rajasekar (left) is a composer who is equally comfortable in the Indian Classical Carnatic vocal tradition and in Western composition. Her *Devotee* puts these two worlds in dialogue with a Western choir singing a German text set by J.S. Bach and a Carnatic vocalist singing words from the *Bhagavad Gita*. “They’re both texts that speak directly to the idea of the divine.”

Ristow noted that improvisation is a central part of the Carnatic vocal tradition. “A lot of what our vocalist Lalit Subramanian will be singing is improvised, but everything the choir will perform is notated, although at times the rhythm is quite free. What I love about the piece is that it brings together two musical worlds of contemplation. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever performed.”

Although Benjamin Britten’s “Festival Cantata,” *Rejoice in the Lamb*, may be the most well-known piece on the program, it was also chosen because of its text. In his long poem, *Jubilate Agno*, Christopher Smart talks about how all the animals and all things of the world are a reflection of divine energy.

“There is one moment in the piece that is one of the most magical moments in Western music,” Ristow said. “Every now and then a composer will try to create a sense of timelessness within a rhythmic system, and there’s this incredible section where the text is

...for at that time malignity ceases, and the devils themselves are at rest. For this time is perceptible to man through a remarkable stillness and serenity of soul.

“Then it goes into one of the most beautiful *Alleluias*, which on the paper looks like a classic dotted rhythm, but Britten writes a note saying it should be a little out of time. When you listen to it you’re aware there’s a rhythm, but it also exists in a time beyond time.”

Ristow noted that Pauline Oliveros’ *Sonic Meditations* exist somewhere between composition and meditation. They’re meant to be experienced with a group of people, not necessarily trained musicians. “They’re about opening up one’s mind and listening with more than one’s ears — gaining an awareness of the music in the world, the music

in life, and how we create, respond to, and sense that,” Ristow said, adding that the piece will not be sung as a performance, but as a meditation with the audience.

“The first time I did them was rather terrifying — I was thinking, am I right? Am I doing the right thing? Of course, that’s not the point at all — the point is to just listen, feel, and respond. It’s a beautiful thing to enter into that space.”

Meredith Monk’s “The Earth Seen from Above” from her opera *Atlas* is an untexted work. “The text is literally a sustained letter like N and O that moves among the singers. It’s just gorgeous and completely captivating.”

J.S. Bach’s “Dona Nobis Pacem” (grant us peace), from the composer’s *B-Minor Mass* is a piece that Ristow said is musically perfect. “The text speaks exactly to our goal with this concert which is meant to channel peace into the world.”



Written between 1914 and 1917, Lili Boulanger’s *Vieille Prière Bouddhique* (‘Old Buddhist Prayer’) is subtitled ‘A Prayer for All Humanity.’ “In the second verse, there’s a line that says ‘May all women, May all men, Aryans and non-Aryans, together find the path that is destined to them,’ which politically was a dangerous thing to be saying as a composer just beginning to establish herself in France,” Ristow said. “I find it an incredibly moving and daring piece.”

In his program note, Charles McGuire writes: Missy Mazzoli’s *The Shield of the Heart* sets a text by Farnoosh Fathi which is not traditional, but rather a collection of neutral syllables. First, a single voice yodels using vowel sounds, and is then joined by other members of the choir singing on “mm” and “ah” over slowly-shifting chords.

Philip Glass’s “Knee Play 5” is the closing scene from his opera *Einstein on the Beach* and instructs the choir to solfège the names of the notes. “There’s some spoken text on top of it as well, including a lovely extended speaking solo for John Mills.”

Reena Esmail’s *Take What You Need* is meant for community performance. “So Emily Capece, one of our singers who also directs the Oberlin Choristers will teach us the audience part of it.”

Ristow said that its text defines the program — take a moment, take a breath, take what you need. “I started planning this program two years ago, but now feels like a really

important moment for us all to just practice finding our breathing, finding our centering again.”

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