

## “Meditations and Mysticism” opens Cleveland Chamber Choir season

by Kevin McLaughlin



It somehow seemed wrong to clap and cheer at the end of Cleveland Chamber Choir’s “Meditations and Mysticism” program on October 26. Less a concert than an administering of musical healing, the event left us feeling more like sitting quietly and sipping measured breaths to prolong our newfound tranquil state.

In a program of ten carefully conceived and sequenced musical episodes, artistic director Gregory Ristow brought a politically weary crowd some much-needed spiritual succor and peace through music.

The very first sounds were extraordinary. Aided by the resonance of Trinity Cathedral, Hildegard von Bingen’s antiphon *O virtus sapientiae* arose mysteriously from somewhere and surrounded listeners with a choir of spirits — perhaps always present but only now evident — blended into one flexible and ubiquitous sound.

A congruency of Western and Indian Classical Carnatic traditions was made poignant by Shruthi Rajasekar’s *Devotee*. Singing texts from Bach’s Cantata BWV 6 and the *Bhagvad Gita*, carnatic vocalist Lalit Subramanian sat on an elevated platform at center stage to deliver a rapturous performance.

Lili Boulanger’s *Vieille Prière Bouddhique* continued the West-East congruence. Originally scored for choir, solo tenor, and orchestra, Natalie Mealey captured the whole-tone-infused orchestral writing on piano, and Peter Wright sang the brief but glorious tenor solo, with text based on a Buddhist daily prayer for the universe, calling all people to attain peace and joy.

The best-known work on the program, Benjamin Britten’s *Rejoice in the Lamb*, Op. 30, is based in part on an eighteenth-century religious poem by Christopher Smart.

Originally conceived for boys' and men's choir with orchestral accompaniment, this was a deft recalibration for SATB chorus, four soloists, and organ.

The choir evoked the past with pure syllables and timbral control, while Britten's harmonic language kept us tied closer to the present. Ristow kept the pace and meditative power of this sixteen-minute work intact with extraordinary dynamic control. The four soloists — soprano Val Sibilia, alto Joanna Tomassoni, tenor Manuel Gomez, and bass-baritone Brian Wacker — only helped matters with their clarity of diction and faultless intonation. Natalie Mealey, though positioned far upstage, was a close and supportive presence at the organ, enveloping the hall with warmth and depth.

After intermission, Bach's *Dona nobis pacem* kept the glow. As the transcendent conclusion to the composer's magisterial *B-minor Mass*, the chamber proportions of this performance, led by assistant conductor Peter Wright, were a benefit. The Gregorian chant melody that Bach interweaves in four-part fugal texture was clear and the text easy to follow, the latter helpfully projected in translation onto a screen at the side of the stage (as was the case for all works on the program).

Whatever degree of enlightenment we had by now attained was made even more accessible with the next four works, which involved either audience participation or non-textual expression.

Missy Mazzoli's *The Shield of the Heart is the Heart*, first performed in 2021, uses a setting of text by American poet Farnoosh Fathi. The text, first uttered by a solo voice in neutral syllables and vowels, is joined by the others singing "mm" and "ah" over slowly moving chords. Without a projected text to follow, the audience — and presumably the performers — are invited to enter a trance-like state, perhaps with thoughts of calmer times.

"Environmental Dialogue," excerpted from Pauline Oliveros' *Sonic Meditations*, was overtly inclusive, inviting the audience to participate by first observing their own breath, then quietly reinforcing a sound they might hear around them. It was a remarkably peaceful, connecting experience in the company of strangers.

In "Earth Seen from Above" from Meredith Monk's opera *ATLAS*, the composer requires a capella singers, spread out according to their vocal timbres, to sing vibrato-less, non-prescribed pitches on the syllables, "nn" and "doh." This was also an effective relaxant for anyone within earshot.

Philip Glass' "Knee Play 5" (from *Einstein on the Beach*) seemed a little counter-intentional coming after the previous three, wrenching us out of our serenity

with a jarring degree of required focus. Conductor, performers, and audience were suddenly responsible for long stretches of inexplicable text (a meandering narrative about sailboats, railroads, and love from John), counting (1-2-3-4-5-6, etc.), and solfège syllables. Varied rhythms and meters sometimes doubled in speed. Miraculously, there were no lapses in concentration from the performers.

Soprano Emily Capece was the benevolent shepherdess of communal singing in Reena Esmail's *Take What You Need*. Capece, solo violinist Benjamin Seah, the choir, and the audience sang a text in call-and-response that exhorted us to nourish ourselves by "taking what we need." It concluded the program and instilled us all with a new and welcome state of well-being.

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