

Cleveland Chamber Choir: "Little Match Girl Passion"

by Mike Telin



Cleveland Chamber Choir will present a program centered around David Lang's *Little Match Girl Passion* on December 20 and 21 at the Cleveland School of the Arts. Artistic Director Gregory Ristow has curated a playlist of Christmas music to precede Lang's piece — a modern day retelling of the 1845 Hans Christian Andersen story influenced by J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* — and followed by his own arrangement of *Good*

King Wenceslas, the classic Christmas Carol about supporting those in need.

In a recent interview Ristow said, "*The Little Match Girl Passion* has become a piece that's performed a lot around the holidays — a time that a lot of us take a moment to stop and think about people who are in need and our and society's role in supporting them." The concerts are presented in partnership with Northeast Ohio Food Bank. Register for free tickets for the 7:30 pm performances [here](#).



"For anyone who hasn't heard *The Little Match Girl Passion*, it would be hard to describe what a transporting piece of music it is," Ristow (left) said. "It just draws you in and takes you on this deep and beautiful emotional journey, which is really the centerpiece of the program. So for me, the question was how to create an evening that is one cohesive whole when the major work is just a little more than 35 minutes of music."

Ristow's solution was to begin the program — performed without intermission — with half a dozen carols including Zoltán Kodály's arrangement of *Veni, veni Emmanuel*, Abbie Betinis' setting of Christina Rossetti's *In the Bleak Midwinter*, and Reena Esmail's "The Year's Midnight" from *A Winter Breviary*, and link them with electronic interludes newly composed by Tom Lopez. "The connective tissue that Tom has created turns it into one interconnected whole which I think is going to be quite beautiful."



Lopez (left) said the interludes will take the place of applause in order to create a meditative atmosphere. "Our intention is to give the audience permission not to applaud. I do respect that our instinct as an audience member is to show our appreciation for performers, but it's okay not to do that until the very end of the program. I think that tying the whole evening together to make it contemplative suits that purpose."

The composer said that he wanted to create music that was clearly different from the carols and the David Lang, but not so disconnected from those works that it would jolt people out of the space that they were inhabiting during those pieces.

"I wanted it to be an ambient soundscape. And I think that by doing that it signals to the audience that they have permission to daydream a little bit, or to be reflective."

Lopez noted that he will be performing behind the scenes during the concerts. "It won't be as simple as just hitting play, so I won't be able to just sit back and wait as an audience member. There'll be microphones that will send the sound of the performance to me, and I will process that in real time. What I'm creating has a specific purpose in this program — in a way, I hope people don't notice what I'm doing, because it's not intended to draw your attention. So at the end, if people don't say anything about my music, but rather say something about the power of the program, then I'll know what I did was successful."

The concerts will also include works of art created by students at Cleveland School of the Arts. "They were each assigned a scene from the story of *The Little Match Girl Passion* to render however they'd like," Ristow said. "They all wound up creating two-dimensional art using different media. We have some pencil art, oil art, and digital art, so it's a beautiful and interesting mix. I can't wait to be able to share those."

Concluding our conversation, Ristow noted just how exciting this program is for him. "I have to say *The Little Match Girl Passion* is in my top ten of all pieces. I'm excited and I'm nervous because it's one of these things I want to do so well because it deserves

careful attention. And I'm really excited to present this to our audiences. It's going to be a very special concert."

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