

## Northwest Ohio Vocal Arts Ensemble at Cleveland Heights' Church of the Savior (Dec. 15)

By Kevin McLaughlin



The fifteen singers of the Northwest Ohio Vocal Arts Ensemble (NOVA) gladdened the heart at Cleveland Heights' Church of the Saviour on Saturday, December 15, in a program drawing from Medieval chant, early Renaissance, and 20th-century settings.

Artistic director Kevin S. Foster and his Toledo-based choir presented a comforting and relatable version of the Nativity story in a sequence of hymns, motets, and carols collectively called “Songs of Wonder: The Nativity Through the Ages.”

Even for the non-religious, the antiquity of the repertoire, the grandeur of the building, and the winsomeness of the singing all worked in combination to evoke a collective sentiment, a shared sense of seasonal memories, and a timeless message of peace and good will.

The group might have benefitted from a kinder acoustic — this one was dry and unforgiving, revealing too easily the occasional soprano voice sticking out of the texture. Though the program was brief, the ensemble began to show signs of fatigue in the latter carols.

The two Renaissance sets at the beginning showed off the voices in their best light. The four-part setting of Josquin des Prez's *Ave Maria* was beautifully paced and intimate, with each section of the ensemble providing the perfect proportion of human expression and objectivity. Jan Pieterzoon Sweelinck's cheerful *Hodie Christus natus est* stated its case very simply in a calm and joyous performance.

Throughout the evening, the singing was exquisitely controlled, and never loud. Fine intonation and blend managed to prevail in the acoustically absorbent space.

Emotionally and sonically, the music-making blossomed in the German set. Hugo Distler's less familiar setting of Michael Praetorius' *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen* and NOVA's rendition beautifully captured the Virgin Mary's sense of astonishment and wonder. From Max Reger, who claimed to owe everything to J.S. Bach, came two harmonically uncomplicated (for this composer) selections. NOVA sang the attractive *O Jesulein süß* and *Schlaf, mein Kindelein* with a moving combination of austerity and reverence.

Diction from all was precise, even in the easily underestimated English settings. Chanticleer's Joseph Jennings contributed the mashup of *We Three Kings* and *Star of Wonder*, which the choir executed in stately and contemplative terms.

*Lully, Lulla, Lullay (Thou Little Tiny Child)*, a surprisingly fresh setting of the Coventry Carol text by Philip Stopford, served as a parting carol — one final reminder that Christmas is a season that connects the past with the present.

*Photo from the earlier Toledo performance.*

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