

Cleveland Chamber Choir to feature works by Salamone Rossi

By Daniel Hathaway



Cleveland Chamber Choir will devote its midwinter concerts to the music of the prolific Italian Jewish composer and violinist Salamone Rossi, a transitional figure who bridged the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and was equally at home in the worlds of Jewish liturgical

and Italian secular music. Like his contemporary Claudio Monteverdi, he was employed at the court of the Gonzaga family in Mantua.

Artistic director Gregory Ristow will lead the Chamber Choir and youth choir HaZamir in “Synagogue and Salon” on Saturday, March 1 at 8pm at Congregation Mishkan Or in Beachwood, and Sunday, March 2 at 4 pm at West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church in Rocky River. Admission is by “pay what you can.”

I recently spoke with Ristow and his colleague, harpist Anna O’Connell, via Zoom to learn more about these concerts.

Daniel Hathaway: Salamone Rossi — what an interesting character. How did these programs come about?

Gregory Ristow: I’ve known his psalm settings for some time, as I think most choral musicians have. We included one of his psalms on our Iberian Peninsula program, and in that process, I looked at the complete editions of Rossi’s works that we have in the library at Oberlin. I was overwhelmed at how much there is. The vast majority of it is unrecorded, and probably unperformed for many years. It’s really exciting and wonderful stuff that I think audiences will enjoy.

DH: And Anna O'Connell has assisted you in putting this together.

GR: Anna is an early music expert with a doctorate from Case. We've been working together on programming these concerts to include works by Rossi as well as other music that would have been heard at the time in Mantua. Monteverdi was there for the early part of his career and the Gonzaga court was extremely wealthy and supportive of musicians, so lots of great things were happening.

DH: Has Rossi's music been a fascination of yours as well, Anna?

Anna O'Connell: Actually, this topic was new to me. I have studied a number of musicians from Florence during the same time period. I was really into Francesca Caccini, and I was working on women composers who were also thinking about the performer as a composer, as an improviser, as a dancer — as someone who can think of music and it just comes off the top of their head. So I really love this time period. When Greg said, Hey, can you help me think through some of this? I said, 'Let's go.'

As I learned more about Rossi the idea for a program started percolating. What were the sounds in the streets of Mantua? What were the sounds at the court? Who were Rossi's contemporaries?



I was thinking about Leon of Modena in Venice, who was experimenting with music that hadn't been heard in the synagogues before, new melodies for Hebrew chant and cantillation. He was inspired by the court music and the opera of the time. And his friendship with Rossi inspired Rossi to do some great things

DH: So Greg, how did you make your choices?

GR: It was difficult. I sat at the piano over a period of weeks and played through every ounce of surviving music that Rossi has written. We've narrowed our selection down to nine of his Songs of Solomon, seven of his madrigals, and several of his instrumental pieces, including one with dancing. The choice wasn't easy. I really fell in love with a lot of them.

In the Psalms, you definitely feel a lot of the influence of the Venetian polychoral singing that was happening at the time. And the madrigals are very similar in style to Monteverdi's, with all the *ohimè*s at the end — and the affective gestures are just exquisite.

Rossi was a trailblazer in writing polyphonic music for Jewish services, but he also wrote the first intabulated solo madrigals ever published, and early on, his madrigals have continuo parts as well. We're lucky to have a really rich continuo ensemble joining us for the madrigals with Anna on harp, and we'll also have lute and Baroque guitar as well as two violinists and a cellist.

It's an interesting question whether there would have been instruments with the synagogue music, but it's just hard to know. We're going to do those works with continuo organ, much as the polychoral music in Venice would have been performed, because there's such a close link musically there. And on one of the larger pieces, we're also going to add other instruments as well.

DH: Do we know who the professionals were who performed this music in Mantua?

AO'C: We do know a lot of names who were working in the Gonzaga courts who are also listed as Jewish in some capacity, so we can glean from some of the court records who the performing musicians were. It's difficult because most of the synagogues don't exist anymore. Rossi's sister was an accomplished singer and the highest paid woman in the Gonzaga court records.

DH: You've formatted the concerts as walking tours through Mantua.

GR: We begin in a synagogue service on Saturday with some chant that would have been more the norm of synagogue singing styles at the time. From there, we go to a midday literary salon of the sort that were just starting to be a thing around this time period.

They coincide with the emergence of an upper middle class with free time to do things and to explore.

AO'C: Around the same time, we start seeing madrigals being published in print runs between a couple of hundred and a thousand. Rossi had five books of madrigals published during his lifetime, and these would have been performed in courtly settings, but also by groups of people with some time on their hands who wanted to make music together. We'll also have a poetry reading during our visit to the salon.

One of the most prolific woman poets we have in this era is Sara Coppia Sulaam. We have a lot of poetry that was in the form of what she calls sonnets, in which some suitor would come to her salon and be so charmed by her that he'd write her a poem.

Then she would write a response back and then he would send another letter and write another poem. And she would respond to that letter and write another poem. Unfortunately, a lot of them are, 'Oh, you're so wonderful. It's so sad that you're Jewish,' because they're coming from a Christian population who were worried for her eternal soul. And so she would just write, 'I'm a Jewish woman, I can't help that. I have a different worldview, a different perspective.'

But the poetry that exists is quite beautiful. And so we'll think about her presiding over this literary and musical salon, where madrigals are being sung and ideas and information exchanged by women who had some agency and leadership in their home — sort of greatest hits of poetry of the time.

There's definitely a lot of love poetry involved, and a lot of 'Why don't you love me' poetry?

GR: From the salon, we pass into the streets, where we hear some popular dance music. We then make a visit to an evening at court where we get some of the more challenging madrigals and dances, including the Alta Gonzaga, which Anna, is it accurate to say that's like the theme song of the Mantuan court?

AO'C: Probably. In this time period, the nobility would be coached by masters in the language of courtly dance. Fabritio Caroso is a composer and dancing master whose piece, Alta Gonzaga, is dedicated to one of the noble women of the Gonzagan court.

From my research in Florence, I found that the Florentine theme song appeared everywhere. It's in this book, it's in that book, here's a set of violin variations on this tune — all celebrating that court. So I think it's safe to believe that the Alta Gonzaga would have been heard every time the Gonzagos set up court. If they went on vacation in France they would have had a band of musicians playing that song so that they could dance it as they arrived.

We've taken those dance steps, which are written out in very flowery, poetic language — as clear as mud — and used them to compose a new dance, to choreograph a new brando, which is a type of dance by Rossi. We're trying to tie it all together.

DH: Is this walking tour narrated?

GR: We'll have some talking and some projections to help everyone situate themselves and not take a wrong turn on the journey.

DH: And how are you working the HaZamir Choir in?

GR: They're joining us for a number of the Songs of Solomon in the two synagogue sets and that's going to be wonderful.

DH: Is there a grand finale?

GR: We're ending with one of the bigger psalm settings for seven voices. That one has a really singable refrain that comes back over and over. I think it's going to leave the audience humming it on their way out.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 24, 2025

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)