

Christmas with Cantus at Tuesday Musical (Nov. 30)

by Peter Feher



Tuesday Musical gave Akron audiences a generous Christmas gift this year. The presenter tied three holiday classics together in one sumptuous concert on Sunday afternoon, November 30, at E.J. Thomas Hall. First up was the story of *The Velveteen Rabbit*,

followed by a quick waltz through *The Nutcracker* and a ride on *The Polar Express*.

Delightfully, this trio of tales was recounted with drama and poise — not by any actors or dancers but by the eight members of the all-male a cappella ensemble Cantus. The group, based in Minnesota and now in its fourth decade, is once again touring the country with a polished, compact production of carols, pop tunes, and of course Tchaikovsky.

The selections were strung together with festive care and a certain sense of stagecraft. No backdrops or costumes were needed to set the scene, just expert voices (and a touch of choreography).

After an opener of “Christmas Time Is Here,” ending on a beautifully sustained high countertenor note, bass Chris Foss stepped into the storytelling spotlight. He introduced the chapter-book concept for the program, which had the singers delivering spoken narration between musical numbers.

The Velveteen Rabbit got the most thorough theatrical treatment, with almost the entire text of Margery Williams’ bittersweet 1922 children’s novel read aloud. Like

a well-crafted score and libretto, the songs chosen by Cantus tracked with every emotion and turn of the plot.

A couple of carols early on established the setting. “O Tannenbaum” accompanied Christmas morning and the young protagonist’s unwrapping of presents — including a splendid stuffed rabbit — while “Still, Still, Still” underscored that fateful night in the nursery when the titular toy is picked as the new favorite.

The story’s timeless themes of love and loss in childhood came to the fore in two jazz standards. “Nature Boy” was the suaver tune, sung in a nod to Nat King Cole by bass Samuel Bohlander-Green. Billy Hill’s “The Glory of Love” put a somewhat pat moral on the proceedings, but tenor Paul John Rudoi soloed with a true tone and touching sincerity.

A few members had something even more personal to contribute. Foss and Rudoi each provided original choral compositions — titled “Perennial Eternally” and “How You Are Made,” respectively — for specific scenes that no existing songs would have suited. Cantus didn’t spare any creativity in telling this tale that starts on Christmas but takes off imaginatively from there.

After intermission, the program returned to the realm of holiday cheer, the ensemble warbling a version of the Miniature Overture from *The Nutcracker* before sampling several more of Tchaikovsky’s beloved confections. The “Dance of the Reed Flutes” works surprisingly well sung on doo-doo-doo’s, as does the “Waltz of the Flowers.”

Then, it was all aboard *The Polar Express*, with Cantus lined up like the cars of a train and chugging along to an arrangement of “diu diu dang a,” a Taiwanese folk tune that incorporates the sounds of a locomotive. A similar jukebox approach applied to the journey here, though the group could rely on a couple of songs by film composer Alan Silvestri, written for the 2004 movie version of Chris Van Allsburg’s 1985 picture book.

Needless to say, there was one more gift: an encore of Franz Biebl’s *Ave Maria*, which has been a staple for Cantus every season since its founding.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com on December 18, 2025

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