

Cleveland Chamber Choir combines music, flowers, and poetry with “Love in Bloom”

by Stephanie Manning



In the midst of such a chilly and snowy start to the year, a concert titled “Love in Bloom” might sound refreshing right about now. “It should be a very heartwarming program,” Cleveland Chamber Choir artistic director Gregory Ristow said about the group’s upcoming performances. “Even if we are still shivering like crazy in this cold Ohio winter.”

This week, the Choir tours the Northeast Ohio area with a collection of love songs, presenting concerts at United Church of Christ in Kent (February 6), Trinity Cathedral in Cleveland (February 7), and Bethany Lutheran Church in Ashtabula (February 8). Tickets are pay-what-you-wish and can be reserved [online](#).

“This is music that’s just a delight to sing and a delight to hear,” Ristow said. Love, flowers, or both inspired the music by composers including Benjamin Britten, Morten Lauridsen, Brandon Waddles, and Eric Whitacre, along with arrangements by Tōru Takemitsu and Craig Hella Johnson.

Britten’s *Five Flower Songs* “is probably my favorite set of pieces for choir ever written,” Ristow said. While not explicitly about love, these five poems by different writers all mention flowers and deal with change and growth in life. “They’re disguised as these light bon-bons, but they have such beautiful, deep meaning to them as well.”

Other flower-influenced titles include Edie Hill’s “Water Lilies” from *An Illuminated Transience*, Tōru Takemitsu’s arrangement of *Sakura (Cherry Blossoms)*, and Morten Lauridsen’s *Les Chansons des Roses*. Ristow described Lauridsen’s piece as “bubble-bath music” — music with fuzzy, soft chords that “give you the sense of being gently caressed by their beauty.”

Two selections by Palestrina — “Sicut lilium inter spinas” and “Veni, veni, dilecte mi” — pair with a selection by Brandon Waddles for a mini set of pieces with text from the *Song of Songs*. Waddles’ *Set Me as a Seal* is “a beautifully exquisite work,” Ristow said.

“Listening to it, you’ll go, ‘Wow, that was lovely,’ but on the page, it is crazily chromatic.”

Eric Whitacre’s *Five Hebrew Love Songs*, in an expanded version for choir, piano, and violin, precedes the concert’s closer, Craig Hella Johnson’s arrangement/mashup of “I Love You” and “What a Wonderful World.” At each performance, the Choir members will be joined by different combinations of local high school and community choirs. Ristow said he felt moved by the idea that such a big, diverse group of singers will all be “singing the words ‘I love you,’ which are really the heart of this program about love and the beauty of the world.”

The various local ensembles — ChoralWorks, A Capella, una voce music, University Schools Glee Club, Ashtabula County Choral Music Society, and Ashtabula County High School Honor Choir — will also present a few selections of their own earlier in the program.

Ristow said the Chamber Choir is excited to return to Kent and to visit Ashtabula for the first time, along with their usual performance at Trinity Cathedral as the venue’s ensemble-in-residence. “We are basically Northeast Ohio’s professional choir, so it’s really lovely when we get to go a little beyond our downtown Cleveland home.”

As usual, a portion of donations from each concert will be donated to a local organization: [Heights Tree People](#) (in Cleveland and Kent) and [Grand River Conservation Campus](#) (in Ashabula). These choices were “obvious ones for us when we started thinking about the theme of this program — nature and things blooming, things growing,” Ristow said. “This is going to be such a beautiful and fun program for audiences and singers alike, so I’m really excited about it.”

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