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Cleveland Chamber Choir: Season 12 opens with *Path of Miracles* Sept. 25-27

by Mike Telin

"I think every moment of the piece is sonically stunning," Gregory Ristow said during a Zoom call. "You can't hear even a fragment and not want to hear more." The piece Ristow is speaking of is Joby Talbot's *Path of Miracles*.

On Friday, September 25 at 7:30 pm at First Lutheran Church in Lorain, Ristow will lead the Cleveland Chamber Choir in the Ohio premiere of Talbot's four-movement work that traces the pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago.

The program will be repeated on Saturday, September 26 at 7:30 pm at Trinity Cathedral and on Sunday, September 27 at 4:00 pm at Christ Presbyterian Church in Canton. Assistant Conductor Peter Wright will give a pre-concert talk 30 minutes prior to each performance. Pay-what-you-wish tickets are available here.

Commissioned by the British vocal ensemble Tenebrae, the work premiered in 2005. "I've known Tenebrae's recording for a long time," Ristow said, adding that the piece has been on his bucket list for a while. "As we started thinking about a big piece with a story to it to kick off the season, *Path of Miracles* just seemed to be a fit."

The piece is written for seventeen solo voices — five sopranos, four altos, four tenors, and four basses. Ristow pointed out that the basses sing a low A, a half-step below the

famous B-flat in Rachmaninoff's *Vespers*. "I think that Talbot, like Rachmaninoff, used voices like an orchestration as he was writing this. There are so many completely unconventional textures that you don't hear in most choral music."

The Camino de Santiago (the route to the Shrine of St. James) in Compostela, Spain, is one of the major pilgrimages in the Catholic tradition, attracting travelers from all over the world. The text of the piece is based on the words of the pilgrims.

The first movement, 'Roncesvalles,' tells the story of St. James (Santiago translates to St. James in Spanish) and the discovery of his relics by Pelagio the Hermit in 812. The site of that discovery has become the Cathedral of St. James.

"The text is sung in seven languages — Greek, Basque, Galician, Spanish, Latin, English, and French," Ristow said. "We hear from the biblical Book of Acts, chapter 12, verses one and two, that after St. James had been abroad preaching, he returned to Jerusalem, where he was killed by the sword of King Herod, and became the first saint to be martyred."

In 'Burgos,' the audience will hear the imagined words of the travelers as they make their way through the darkest points of the pilgrimage. "When we think about the French itinerary, travelers had to come by foot over the Pyrenees, so it was a dangerous pilgrimage to make."

Ristow said the movement begins with the text 'Innkeepers cheat us, the English steal,' but what gradually emerges is that even amidst the dark times, there are stories of St. James working great miracles.

"There's the story of an innkeeper who planted a silver cup on a father and son who were traveling so that when they left, he could accuse them of stealing. The boy was hanged. The father continued the pilgrimage to Compostela and on the way back, the boy was still hanging on the gallows. He called out to his father, 'I'm still here. St. James has held me up this whole time.' And the villagers cut him down and freed him."

Ristow said that by the end of that movement there's a beautiful turning around. "It closes with the text, 'That we are here is a miracle,' which to me is one of the most beautiful moments of the entire piece with its sense of wonder and awe in the world."

The text in ‘León’ brings the travelers closer to Santiago. “The choir sings of the sun shining in the world, and that sun is an image of God shining from within.”

In the final movement the travelers arrive at Compostela de Santiago. “Coming over Monte do Gozo — the final hill — the Cathedral comes into view. At the very end Talbot brings back the text that he opened with, ‘Lord St. James, onwards, upwards. God aid us.”

Ristow said that librettist Robert Dickinson drew the text from the Codex Calixtinus, a 12th century pilgrims’ folio of hymns and stories about St. James. “That particular text is drawn from the *Dum Pater Familias* chant, one of the more famous St. James chants of the time.”

The concert will open with that chant before proceeding into *Path of Miracles*. “So we have both the imagined words of the pilgrims that Robert Dickinson has written, and the words from Acts 12, and the *Dum Pater Familias*. At times there are three or four different texts being sung at once in three or four different languages. To me, the music resonates with the words of these pilgrims in a beautiful way.”

Although *Path of Miracles* has contemplative moments, Ristow noted that there are places where it feels like rock, video game, and movie music. “There are also some of the most dramatic rhythmic passages I’ve ever conducted.”

The piece is not only performed in front of the audience, but from different locations in the space as well. “That gives listeners the sense that they have gone on a journey — although they’re in the same place, that the orientation of the world has shifted around them and brought them out somewhere else. These stories are very much like *The Canterbury Tales*. You find yourself feeling as though you were making that pilgrimage yourself.”

A portion of all pay-what-you-wish ticket funds will be directed to the Interfaith Group Against Hate. IGAH is a group of faith-based congregations from multiple religious traditions who have joined together to combat rising hate and White Supremacy through research, education, building of relationships across barriers, mutual aid and action.

“Partneriing with them feels especially fitting in this piece, with the story of St. James as the first of the apostles to be martyred,” Ristow said. “And with some of the stories of saints along the path who devoted their life in Spain, even in times of the Reconquista, to supporting, feeding, and even hiding people of all faiths when they were being persecuted.”

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