

Program Notes “Rejoice!” December 9, 2018 Choral Artists of Sarasota

Much of the Western world can sing “Silent Night,” can carol to hymns like “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” and also knows how to “Wish You a Merry Christmas,” so...how does one create an innovative, modern, exciting, and moving concert for the Christmas season, while remaining in touch with the traditional music we love? Artistic Director and conductor Dr. Joseph Holt has found a way to do just that—to combine the new with the familiar and bring you Christmas peace and joy.

Programming choices for Choral Artists’ concerts are the result of many months of careful planning by the Artistic Director. For instance, the choral selections you will enjoy today were chosen in January of 2018, answering the question: how can this concert have meaning and significance? It’s Christmas, with all the good news that entails—that’s the easy part—but it is also the 10th year of Dr. Holt’s tenure as Artistic Director for the Choral Artists, and the 40th anniversary of the founding of Gloria Musicae, now Choral Artists of Sarasota, so **Rejoice!!**, we are having a triple celebration!

In Dr. Holt’s own words: *Gloria* “was easily chosen (since) it is the first work that opened the program I conducted in December 2009 at St. Boniface Church...these were the first notes the audience heard from the ensemble with me at the helm.” And they will be the first notes heard again this afternoon.

Gloria (by Randol Alan Bass, published in 1990) begins with a fanfare, the perfect way to start a celebration. It is a musical setting of the *Gloria* section of the Latin Mass, where it serves as an homage of praise to the creator. Dr. Holt feels its most significant meaning is found in the second line, since peace, no matter how difficult to achieve, may be the most important message of this season:

Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis – and on earth, peace, goodwill towards men

Beyond the fanfare, *Gloria* is an intriguing work with 20th Century harmonies, changing meters, and strong rhythmic drive from a powerful brass and percussion accompaniment (you may notice a passing resemblance to *Star Wars*), balanced by sections of lovely lyricism in various styles. It has what we used to call an “MGM ending,” which means you will be uplifted and excited by the final few moments, and that is only the beginning of our celebration.

Our theme, **Rejoice!!** is now made known, and we step back in time to *The King Shall Rejoice, A Coronation Anthem* written in 1727 by Georg Frederik Handel (1685-1759). Handel was born in Halle, Germany, but in 1710, he was selected by German prince George, the Elector of Hanover, to become his *Kapellmeister*, which translates literally as ‘chapel master,’ but means orchestral conductor, and, in Handel’s case, composer. In 1714, the Elector of Hanover became King George I of Great Britain and Ireland. George I moved to London in 1712 and Handel moved with him, becoming a naturalized British subject in 1727. George I died that same year, and the next King, his son George II, commissioned Handel to compose this anthem for his official ceremony of succession.

The King Shall Rejoice consists of four short choruses in English, using verses from Psalm 21, one of the more bellicose Psalms attributed to David, which suggests that if the King trusts in God, the King’s enemies will be conquered and destroyed by God. From this psalm, Handel wisely chose three verses of praise followed by an Alleluia. This is uplifting, cheerful music. You may notice a certain similarity to the “Hallelujah Chorus” in the first anthem, which is in the same style and the same key, D major.

Hark! the Herald Angels Sing, with music by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847), comes to us in a thrilling arrangement of the familiar carol by Dan Forrest, published in 2015.

Although *Silent Night* is in stylistic contrast with *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, this is not the *Silent Night* you know. In 2018, Michael John Trotta composed charming, fresh music for the familiar words, creating a lovely a cappella work with a quietly dissonant chord structure. There is a brief (aleatoric) moment of intentional musical “chaos” at the words “Christ the Savior Is Born,” when the singers repeat the phrase over and over, but at different times and at different speeds. Dr. Holt says, “The effect is an ethereal one, highlighting the birth in a more reverential manner.” This is followed by a return to the appealing dissonant harmonies. The coda, or ending, has a purity that perfectly fits the final phrase, “love’s pure light.”

There Shall a Star Come Out of Jacob, is a second work by Felix Mendelssohn. It ends with a chorale melody by Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608). The chorale was later harmonized by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), the composer Mendelssohn rescued from obscurity when he rediscovered and performed Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829.

From farther north in Europe, we will hear a 2016 composition by composer Kim Andre Arnesen, *Norwegian Alleluia*. This lively a cappella piece has a contrasting slow section followed by a return to the dance-like energy appropriate to the sentiment of praise and celebration.

Holiday time typically features a ballet performance of the *Nutcracker*, Tchaikovsky’s exotic fairy tale that delights audiences everywhere. Today we feature our pianist, Michael Stewart, and conductor Joseph Holt to tickle the ivories in a four-hand arrangement of some of the classic portions of the score.

The beautiful *O Holy Night* represents for many the deep meaning and glory of Christmas. This gorgeous and moving arrangement by Mack Wilberg, conductor of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, was written in 2009 for the King’s Singers, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and the Orchestra at Temple Square.

Conductor Holt says, *I Wish you Christmas* by English composer John Rutter, is one of his favorites. It “makes you feel all warm and fuzzy inside, particularly with its wish for peace and joy throughout the year, not just at Christmas.” See if you can hear the shifts upwards through three keys, from B, to C, to D-flat, building excitement, and then releasing to the soft, heart-warming ending, which asks for God’s blessing.

You know the final number, but you haven’t heard it like this! *The Twelve Days of Christmas* was arranged by Bob Chilcott in 2004, and it has everything but the kitchen sink thrown in for your entertainment and enjoyment. The music has great rhythmic drive (it’s a real toe-tapper) at the beginning and every time it comes back to “four calling birds.” Listen for the three-note musical cue each time “the birds” return. But the real fun of this arrangement is found in the phrase “five gold rings” which is sung in a different musical style each time it reappears – from Blues, to the Flower Duet from the French opera *Lakmé*, to *Silent Night* (the one you know), to Swing combined with Barbershop, to Funk, to a sweet choral moment, to a second sweet choral moment (marked “wistful and expressive”), and ending with Gospel. And listen for the ladies to be truly dancing...and singing.

Rejoice! and find peace in the New Year. --Dr. Mary Jane Ayers