



ELEKTRA

WOMEN'S CHOIR

creating • exploring • celebrating

Elektra's mandate is to inspire and lead in the choral art form through excellence in performance and the creation, exploration, and celebration of women's repertoire.

Chez Nous: Christmas with Elektra 2018

Listener's Guide

By Morna Edmundson, Artistic Director

<http://elektra.ca/concerts-events/chez-nous-christmas-with-elektra/>

Saturday, November 24, 2018, 7:30pm | Shaughnessy Heights United Church, Vancouver
Sunday, November 25, 2018, 3:00pm | Good Shepherd Church, South Surrey

Performers:

Elektra Women's Choir

Morna Edmundson, Artistic Director

Stephen Smith, piano and organ

Ben Heppner, tenor

VYC Kids and director Cassie Luftspring

Welcome! This "Listener's Guide" is meant to give you insight into Elektra's season programming and to make the concert experience richer and more meaningful. I'll be sharing my thoughts on the music we're singing on November 24 and 25, 2018 and the thinking behind the program as a whole. Here you'll also find publisher information and full texts and translations of the works.

When we present our annual Chez Nous concerts, I'm aware that there will be both highly experienced choral listeners in the audience and people for whom this might be their first concert since elementary school. My goal is always to create a welcoming door through which a curious listener can enter. Through our hours of rehearsal and the training that each singer brings to the table, we hope to, in the end, get out of the way and let the voice of the composer, arranger, poet, and music speak.

Chez Nous this year is a special occasion during which we share the stage with one of Canada's most celebrated opera artists, the incomparable Ben Heppner. Before his recent retirement from opera, Ben's beautiful tenor voice took him to the most prestigious opera houses of the world, where his gripping performances garnered critical acclaim. We also welcome the delightful voices of VYC Kids and their director Cassie Luftspring. Cassie is also a featured arranger on the program and a singer in Elektra's soprano section.

Our opening set by Elektra is built on traditional carols from a variety of cultures, which led to coaches coming into our rehearsals to teach us Romanian and Catalan pronunciation. Neither is simple to an English-speaker's ears! I was attracted to the unison opening of *Domnulet si domn din cer*, a Romanian carol found in a compilation called *Wintersongs* by the Bay Area-based Kitka Women's Vocal Ensemble (www.kitka.org). For 39 years, this excellent group has

been inspired by the traditional songs and vocal techniques from Eastern Europe, traveling and learning first-hand about the styles from each culture. This song sets the stage and, in the third verse, talks about carolling and wishing people well. A perfect welcome to our audience.

*This night is a great night,
Sweet little Lord and Lord in Heaven;
And this night is no ordinary night.
Sweet little Lord and Lord in Heaven;
For it is Christmas night,
The night of the ancient Christmas,
When the Holy Child was born,
The Holy Child here on earth.*

*The Child is crying, He is restless,
Sweet little Lord and Lord in Heaven;
In his mother's arms,
Sweet little Lord and Lord in Heaven;
We wish you good health,
May you all partake of well-being,
May Christ give you everything,
A long life and health.*

We walk along and sing colinde,
Sweet little Lord and Lord in Heaven;
We wish these people all the best,
Sweet little Lord and Lord in Heaven;
Lord in heaven.*

* a Romanian folk carol

Pat-a-Pan is a slightly more familiar carol to North American ears, written by Frenchman Bernard de la Monnoye (1641–1728). He was a well-educated man, trained to be a lawyer but much more interested in poetry. His carols, including *Noël Bourguignon*, which we performed last Christmas, were written using a variation of French that is supposed to sound rustic and traditional. Here at the opening of the concert, we are calling the shepherds to bring their drums and flutes to the stable to welcome the Christ Child. “Pat-a-pan” is supposed to be the sound of the drums and “tu-re-lu-re-lu” the sound of the flutes. Here’s a note by arranger Shawn Kirschner, Composer in Residence of the Los Angeles Master Chorale. Our performance will be the Canadian premiere of his unpublished arrangement.

Pat-a-pan is a gem of a carol, with a brilliant and catchy melody, and lively, memorable words by Bernard de La Monnoye. The original Burgundian/French has some wonderful verses that are either lost in translation, or never translated in the first place, such as the traditional third verse:

*Ce jour le Diable est vaincu,/ Rendons en grace a Jesus./ Au son de ces
tambourin,/Tu-re-lu-re-lu, pat-a-pat-a-pan,/Au son de ces instruments,/ Faisons la
nique a Satan!*

I hesitate to attempt to translate, because I don't have adequate knowledge of contemporary usage, nor do I want to offend, but suffice it to say that this verse ends

with “we’ll thumb our noses at Satan” – unless a rougher rendering is more the idea. This kind of concentrated expression and rustic flavor -- often found in older carols -- is delightful. I wanted to include this colorful but seldom-heard verse in my setting, and made my own translation:

On this day our Savior's grace / Makes the Devil hide his face;/ Let the merry tune play on:/ Tu-re-lu-re-lu...;/ For the tune that you now play/ Drives the darkness far away!

The impetus for the creation of this setting was a carol sing-off humorously couched by LA Master Chorale music director Grant Gershon as a "battle of the sexes." For a couple of years running, the women of the Master Chorale sang the gentle lullaby *Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella* for the annual LAMC carols concerts while the men countered with the extremely robust *Brightest and Best*. It didn't seem entirely fair to compete on such contrasting material, so the next year I switched things up, and wrote the women this vibrant *Pat-a-pan*, and gave the men the Czech *Rocking Carol* as their own lullaby. The SATB piano version of *Pat-a-pan* was later created at the request of Dr. Jo-Michael Scheibe, and premiered by the USC Thornton Chamber Singers.

From this robust and playful piece, we go to the hauntingly beautiful *El Cant dels Ocells*, a Catalan carol. Our soloist is Jillian Schina. Even if you don't think you know this Christmas carol, I think you'll recognize the melody. The arranger is our friend Bernat Vivancos, who was for several years choir master at the Monserrat Monastery outside Barcelona. He wrote this arrangement for the boys there, and publishes it on his website <http://bernativivancos.com/>. Again, we are giving the Canadian premiere of this arrangement. Here's what Bernat had to say about it:

“El cant dels ocells” is one of the best-loved of all Catalan popular songs. Made popular by the celebrated cellist Pau [Pablo] Casals, this Christmas song tells the tale of the many kinds of bird who praised the Divine Infant’s birth with their song. This harmonisation differs from the more traditional versions employing a neutral modal language that never disfigures the ever-present major melody, surrounded by a constant, uniform aura of sound. The melody, presented by a soloist, gives way to a simple lineal pattern for three voices and finishes with a fuller, slightly gray atmosphere.

What a curious adjective for music “gray” is! Bernat achieves it by layering sustained, subtly-changing chords in close harmony under the melody. The altos are called on to sing very low in this piece (as they also did in *Pat-a-Pan*). The birdsongs at the beginning and end are not actually in the score, but I wanted to have listeners wonder why we were doing that, and read the English translation!

Seeing the rise of the brightest light on the most elated night; the birds, singing, go to celebrate with delicate voices.

The linnets were singing: “Oh, how beautiful and lovely is the Child of Mary!” and the merry thrush says: “Death is defeated. My life is born.

Our friend, Canadian composer and conductor Laura Hawley, wrote her *Carol Trilogy* for Elektra in 2017 and we premiered it at Chez Nous last year. For its sheer energy and joy, I wanted to reprise just one of the movements this year, the German carol *In Dulci Jubilo*. Here's how Laura describes her arrangement:

This carol has captured my imagination since I first heard the story of how it came to be. According to folklore, the German mystic Heinrich Seuse penned it after having been led by the hand of an angel into a whole group of angels, who sang this carol as they drew him into a heavenly dance of worship with them. This setting of In dulci jubilo begins with the sound of angel wings in mind, and the piano is the first to introduce the tune, with the altos responding in harmony. In the introductory section, I imagine the dazzling scene of many angels all singing together and the dizzying feeling of being drawn into their song and dance, and this jubilant feeling carries through the whole setting of this bright carol in different ways. Just as the piece begins with angels, the fluttering wings return at the end as the jubilantly mystical experience unwinds and vanishes with wings fluttering off into the night.

The text is macaronic, meaning incorporating two languages, in this case, German and Latin.

In dulci jubilo, nun singet und seid froh!
Unsers Herzens Wonne leit in praesepio,
Und leuchtet als die Sonne matris in gremio
Alpha es et O!

O Jesu parvule, Nach dir ist mir so weh.
Tröst mir mein Gemüte, O Puer optime;
Durch alle deine Güte, O Princeps Glorïae,
Trahe me post te!

O Patris caritas! O Nati lenitas!
Wir wärn all' verloren Per nostra criminal;
So hat er uns erworben Coelorum gaudia;
Eia, warn wir da!

Ubi sunt gaudia? Nirgends mehr denn da,
Da die Engel singen Nova cantica,
Und die Schellen klingen In Regis curia;
Eia, warn wir da!

vv. 1, 2, 4 fourteenth-century
=v. 3 Valentin Triller (d. 1573) (Praetorius, 1607)

An English translation reads:

*With sweet jubilation, Let songs and gladness flow!
All our joy reclineth in a manger
And like the sun he shineth in [your] mother's lap
You are Alpha and Omega!*

*O infant Jesus, I yearn for thee always!
Comfort me and stay me, O best of boys*

*By thy great love I pray thee, O Prince of Glory,
Draw me after you [to heaven]!*

*O love of the Father! O mercy of the son!
Condemned we had remained Through our sins
But he for us hath gained The joys of heaven
In paradise afar,
Where joys unending are.*

*Where are joys
More deep than heaven's are?
In heaven are angels singing New songs
In heaven the bells are ringing
In the courts of the King
O that we were there!*

Translation from source editors

Source: "The shorter New Oxford Book of Carols" ed. Keyte, Parrott, & Bartlett

Using the four traditional carols as a jumping off spot, we move into the final two works of Elektra's opening set – two original compositions rather than arrangements. Both are settings of texts that musicians and audiences may know from other composers' works. Don Macdonald's 2015 composition, *There is No Rose*, is a lovely example of his compositional style, published by Cypress Choral Music (www.cypresschoral.com CP 1106). Our soloist is Holly Kennedy. The same words were set to music by Benjamin Britten in his famous *A Ceremony of Carols*. They come from the Trinity Carol Roll, a 15th century manuscript containing words and music for 13 carols.

There is no rose of such virtue as is the rose that bare Jesu. Alleluia.

For in this rose contained was heaven and earth in little space. Res miranda (wonderful thing).

By that rose we may well see there be one God in persons three. Pares forma (of the same form).

The angels sungen the shepherds to, "Gloria in excelsis Deo" (Glory to God in the highest). Gaudeamus (Let us rejoice).

Leave we all this worldly mirth and follow we this joyful birth. Transeamus (Let us go).

The set closes with the world premiere of Stephen Smith's new work, commissioned by Elektra singer Maureen Ciarniello. In *The Time of Christēmas*, like the piece before it, the words come from a much earlier time, in this case 16th century England. Like *Pat-a-Pan*, it exhorts the listener to join in heartily in the Christmas spirit – in this case there are consequences for not doing so! Listen for the robust, cavalier-sounding piano part Stephen wrote for himself to play, which grows in harmonic complexity and bravura with each verse.

Let no one come into this hall,
Be ye groom, page, nor yet marechal,
But that a song ye bring withal,
For now is the time of Christēmas.

If that ye say ye cannot sing,
Some other sport then shall ye bring,
That it may please at this feasting,
For now is the time of Christēmas.

If neither sport nor song ye know,
Then we shall ask no more, I trow,
But to the stocks then shall ye go!
For now is the time of Christēmas.
Anon. 16th C.

Next we feature our 2018 guest children's choir, VYC Kids, part of the Vancouver Youth Choir family (www.vancouveryouthchoir.com). Their conductor is Cassie Luftspring. She explains her approach to their four pieces this way "I'm always looking for music that will engage the children as well as the audience. And for a variety of teachable concepts. For example, *Once in Royal David's City* gives the singers the opportunity to learn a classic, historical carol, and the chance for two of our singers to do solos. On Saturday, Celie Joffe and on Sunday, Leif Boyd. *Welcome Yule* is by a historically important British composer, and the text is Old English, connecting them to people of another era and words they won't learn in their daily lives. *Winter Sleigh Ride* introduces 3-part singing, and *Winter Lullaby* is all about legato singing and storytelling."

Before intermission, the audience joins in the singing with Georg Friedrich Handel's *Joy to the World*, in the familiar arrangement by Lowell Mason. The spritely descant is by English composer John Rutter. This is the only time in the program you'll hear the organ.

Intermission

After intermission, and anticipating the arrival of our guest artist Ben Heppner, the music requires the listener to "lean in" to a sparse and gripping new, a cappella setting of familiar words by Robert Croo (1534) which are best known to a different melody as the *Coventry Carol*. San Francisco-based Eric Tuan dedicated his 2010 work, *A Cradle Song*, to Robert Geary and the Piedmont Children's Chorus, an accomplished Bay Area choir known for its decades of commissioning and exploration. This is classic Elektra singing, telling the story of King Herod's systematic and deadly search for the Christ Child across the land. The relentless "lulla, lullay" is the soothing sound of a lullaby to a crying child. Those of us who have had babies know that the lullaby also soothes the singer. Frequent dissonances including D#s and Es sustained in the altos, create an uneasy atmosphere. The soprano solo, by implication the voice of Mary, is by Danica Kell. We are proud to give the Canadian premiere of this effective, haunting work.

The second of three world premieres in Chez Nous this year is also our first chance to hear Ben Heppner. Stephen Smith, commissioned by Elektra to write a new work for Elektra and Ben together, looked for source material in Mennonite hymns, a nod to Ben's Mennonite background. He found *Sweet Was The Song* in an 18th century Mennonite collection, an original melody to words from the 16th century (*William Ballet's Lute Book*). Connecting thematically to

the Tuan work, this is also about Mary comforting her child with a song. “Balulalow” is a Scottish equivalent to “Lully, lullay”, or “lullaby”. The story is told by the tenor voice, with the choir providing a gentle, rich texture behind him. This is classic Stephen Smith, and we are loving singing it!

Next, Ben takes the stage with Stephen on piano for four solos: *If I Had a Little Coat* by Kenneth Walton, *What Child is This?*, a traditional English carol arranged by Mary O’Hara and transcribed by Eldon McBride, who has a long history of collaboration with Ben. *The Holy Boy* by John Ireland was first heard as a solo piano composition in 1913. It was so popular that Ireland proceeded to reorchestrate it over several decades, including this vocal version in 1938, with words by Herbert S. Brown. Ben closes his set with *Rise Up, Shepherd and Follow*, a traditional African American song arranged by Mark Hayes.

Your turn to sing with us again as we join voices in a spirited arrangement of *Winter Wonderland* by Stephen Smith.

The final set of the concert sees all of us together, Elektra, VYC Kids, and Ben Heppner. Picking up on the wintery weather theme, *Romance in Waltz Time* is one of Minnesota composer Abbie Burt Betinis’ Christmas compositions premiered annually in a special broadcast on Minnesota Public Radio. I heard it on YouTube done by just two singers and piano and immediately wrote to Abbie, because it doesn’t appear on the list of compositions on her website. She was delighted to make it available to us. Our performance is certainly the Canadian premiere, maybe even the first performance by a choir. Cassie Luftspring conducts. From Abbie’s score, we get this background on the Burt Family Carols:

In 1922, Abbie’s great-grandfather, Rev. Bates G. Burt, began composing an annual Christmas carol and sending it as a seasonal greeting card to his friends, family, and parishioners. In 1942, he passed the job of composing the music to his son, Alfred S. Burt, a jazz trumpeter and young composer. The father-son team produced five carols together before Bates’s death in 1948. Alfred went on to write a total of fifteen Christmas carols, including the popular “Caroling, Caroling,” and “Some Children See Him,” made famous originally by the Voices of Jimmy Joyce and now recorded by artists all over the world.

Since 2001, Abbie has been continuing this annual family tradition. For her 15th carol, Romance in Waltz Time, she reimagined one of her great uncle Alfred’s rare, unpublished tunes (Voice 1: m.1-32), commissioning lyrics for it from poet Michael Dennis Browne, and interlocking the wistful waltz with her own countermelody and lyrics. The result is a duet that speaks across the generations about transformation through the magic of love. Romance in Waltz Time premiered on Minnesota Public Radio in December 2015 before being sent, as always, as the family Christmas card.

Ben

You bring the starlight and I’ll bring snow; Over this heaven on earth we’ll go. Hold high our lanterns so we can see who in this miracle we could be. These petals of angels through all the air, dancing around us, my darling dear; Why are we waiting for dreams to come true? Here is my heaven with you.

Choirs

*In the air, everywhere, how your music wanders through. On my own, not alone;
listening for you. Just come hold my hand, here, in the morning air, and spin me into
your silver song, so my heart can sing along. Everything caroling, carrying it on, and I'll
dream it ever and always new. Do you hear my song to you?*

And now, in her third role of the evening (Elektra singer, VYC Kids conductor being the first two), Cassie Luftspring shows us her composer, or rather arranger, self. *On Christmas* is a sparkling arrangement of two carols in 6/8 time: *I Saw Three Ships* and *Sussex Carol*. Our thanks to Cassie for creating a piece with so much energy and joy. The commission was supported by the Vancouver Foundation, the BC Arts Council, and the Diane Loomer Commissioning Fund for Elektra Women's Choir, as part of our three-year Celebrating Women Composers project (<https://elektra.ca/outreach/celebrating-women-composers/>).

And we close with Daniel Kantor's beautiful *Night of Silence*, a counter melody to *Silent Night*.

We look forward to seeing you at Chez Nous: Christmas with Elektra. Thanks for reading! If you have any questions for me, don't hesitate to write morna@elektra.ca.

Morna