



# 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**

by Morna Edmundson, Artistic Director

Saturday, November 23, 2019

Pacific Spirit United Church, Vancouver

Sunday, November 24, 2019

Elektra Women's Choir

Morna Edmundson, Artistic Director

Stephen Smith, piano

with guests, Joan Blackman, violin, Rebecca Wenham, cello

and the Vancouver Bach Children's Chorus, Marisa Gaetanne, Music Director

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 and how the whole program comes together. Here you'll also find 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 in many years. 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.

Elektra opens the concert alone, with one of the oldest Advent tunes still in popular use: *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*. Arranger Ulrika Emanuelsson calls this stunning *a cappella* arrangement, which sets just two of the carol's verses, a "Medieval processional hymn".

### **Veni, Emmanuel**

ancient carol, arr. Ulrika Emanuelsson (b. 1965)

Veni, veni Emmanuel!  
Captivum solve Israel!  
Qui gemit in exilio,  
Privatus Dei Filio,  
Gaude, gaude, Emmanuel  
nascetur pro te, Israel.

Veni, veni o oriens!

Solare nos adveniens,  
Noctis depelle nebulas,  
Dirasque noctis tenebras.  
Gaude, gaude, Emmanuel  
nascetur pro te, Israel.

English translation:

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here,  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

*O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,  
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

That tune, familiar almost certainly to most listeners, leads us into a set of traditional carols from around Great Britain and Europe. I feel it's so important to keep these melodies which survive generation after generation in circulation through choral music. In North America, Christmas carols are almost the only common songs we share across a crowd of strangers. Choirs everywhere love singing them and audiences love hearing them. But we also like singing new arrangements of them, hence the constantly-growing body of arrangements in publication and on YouTube. We in choirs may love tradition, but we also love breaking out of the familiar into something new that challenges us. This is one of the things that keeps Chez Nous fresh for me each year. It may have common threads from year to year, but the repertoire is never the same twice.

### **Still, Still, Still**

traditional Austrian carol, arr. Ken Berg

Amy Dawson, soloist

This lullaby is one of Austria's most famous carols. We are singing it in English translation. If you love this piece, you can find our recording of it with Lorna McGhee on flute on our Christmas album called "Still". This year, since we have Joan Blackman with us, and since violin and flute share a similar range, I was very happy to be able to program this lovely piece again.

Still, still, still,  
One can hear the falling snow.  
For all is hushed,  
The world is sleeping,  
Holy Star its vigil keeping.  
Still, still, still,  
One can hear the falling snow.

Sleep, sleep, sleep,  
'Tis the eve of our Saviour's birth.  
The night is peaceful all around you, Close your eyes,  
Let sleep surround you.  
Sleep, sleep, sleep,  
'Tis the eve of our Saviour's birth.

Dream, dream, dream,  
Of the joyous day to come.  
While guardian angels without number,  
Watch you as you sweetly slumber.  
Dream, dream, dream,  
Of the joyous day to come.

**Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella!** traditional French carol, arr. Sarah Jaysmith  
Canadian work

We commissioned this arrangement from Vancouver composer Sarah Jaysmith four years ago and released a recording on our “Silent Night” CD in 2018. As with the previous piece, I chose to sing it in English rather than its original French to help bridge the gap between the choir and audience members who might miss the story otherwise. Here and there in the piece, you’ll hear soloists Shelley Koke (Isabella) and Holly Kennedy (Jeanette) calling each other to run and see the Christ Child in the middle of the night. They try to shush each other since “the baby is sleeping”, but they are clearly excited. The most fun part of this arrangement is the “toc, toc, toc” parts - where we are imitating knocking on the door.

Bring a torch, Jeanette, Isabella!  
Bring a torch, to the cradle we’ll run!  
It is Jesus, good folk of the village,  
Jesus is born, and Mary calls us,  
Ah! Ah! Beautiful is the mother,  
Ah! Ah! Beautiful is her son.

Who is that who comes here a-knocking?  
Who is that knocking here at the door?  
Open up! I’ve arranged on a platter  
Wonderful cakes for all who want them.  
Knock, knock, open the door now quickly  
Knock, knock, open and let us in.

It is wrong when the baby is sleeping,  
It is wrong to make so much noise.  
Please, be quiet, and don’t wake the baby.  
Jesus may rouse at any moment.  
Hush, hush, see how the babe is dreaming,  
Hush, hush, see how he sleeps so well.

Gently, now, in this little stable,  
Gently, now, come close to the crib.  
Jesus is such a beautiful babe,  
His skin is so soft, his cheeks are rosy.  
Oh! Oh! See how he sleeps so soundly,  
Oh! Oh! See how he smiles in dreams.

I wasn't quite truthful when I said the whole first set is traditional carols. Now that Jeanette and Isabella have arrived at the stable, I wanted to continue the manger scene and this lyrical setting of the famous Latin text, *O Magnum Mysterium* by Swiss composer Ivo Antognini fit the bill perfectly.

Here's a note from Ivo about the origins of the piece:

"O Magnum Mysterium is a brief but powerful piece that I wrote for a small church choir directed by my wife, Patrizia, for Christmas of 2010. It was meant as a gift for these good people that came once a week to prepare Christmas songs. The piece should have stayed in the drawer until the following Christmas. However, even during the first rehearsals I noted that the choristers showed a great enthusiasm in singing this composition of mine. Because of this, during the year that followed, I decided to show it to other well-known choirs. To my great surprise, the celebrated Vancouver Chamber Choir agreed to perform the world premiere of the piece in October 2011. A month later, another excellent Canadian ensemble, the Elektra Women's Choir, premiered the version for two equal voices, cello and organ, which I had prepared in the meantime. Many other performances followed in various parts of the world. I would like to mention a magnificent interpretation of my piece by the East Carolina University Chamber Singers, conducted by Andrew Crane and another one with Calicantus Children's Choir, conducted by Mario Fontana. The work is divided into three parts: the first, in a major key, with the four voices that combine, follow, and chase one another to announce the great mystery of the birth of Christ. The second part is in a minor key, and has a darker, melancholy color, and introduces us to the third, conclusive section. The final Alleluja is in mixolydian mode, and has a triumphant and luminous character, but the brief coda brings us back into a more intimate and tranquil climate."

True story - when we first rehearsed this eight years ago, I wasn't sure how to pronounce the composer's surname. So I emailed him and asked the question. Almost immediately, I received back an email with a little 5-second sound file attached. It said, "Hello Morna! My name is Ivo Antognini. Goodbye!" [It's ann-toh-NYEE-nee].

Since we have Rebecca Wenham with us this year, including this piece again was a simple decision. If you were at our 30th Anniversary concert at the Chan Centre in March 2017, you will likely remember the beautiful settings of Armenian hymns we sang with Isabel Bayrakdarian. Rebecca was our cellist for that concert.

O magnum mysterium,  
et admirabile sacramentum,  
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum,  
jacentem in praesepe!  
Beata Virgo, cujus viscera  
meruerunt portare  
Dominum Christum.  
Alleluia.

*O great mystery,  
and wonderful sacrament,  
that animals should see the newborn Lord,  
lying in a manger!  
Blessed Virgin, whose womb  
was worthy to bear*

*the Lord, Jesus Christ.  
Alleluia!*

**Maria durch ein' Dornwald ging** traditional German, arr. Gunnar Eriksson  
Amanda Randt, soloist

With a goal of including pieces that might evoke memories for people from different European countries, I included one of Germany's best-loved carols. This arrangement by very creative Swedish arranger, Gunnar Eriksson, is published on a single sheet of paper with lots of instructions as to options for how one could perform it. As you'll hear, there are layers of musical lines weaving around one another, only one of which is the melody. I was free to choose which ones would be sung in each verse, and I opted for a solo at the beginning and only an alto line below her. In the second time through, the melody is not sung at all, but more layers of countermelodies with different words come in, always with a stinging "Kyrie eleison (Lord, have mercy) being sung. The third iteration is the thickest and most robustly sung, and the final verse reverts to melody with just a few ornamental touches, including a short canon at one beat. It's been fun to experiment with this piece. The freedom Eriksson offers the performers is very much in line with other of his pieces I've sung or conducted. He had a unique and astute sense of what makes choral singers tick and what music will lift off the page into engaging performances.

Maria durch ein Dornwald ging,  
Kyrie eleison.  
Maria durch ein Dornwald ging,  
der hat in sieben Jahrn kein Laub getragen.  
Jesus und Maria.

Was trug Maria unter ihrem Herzen?  
Kyrie eleison.  
Ein kleines Kindlein ohne Schmerzen,  
das trug Maria unter ihrem Herzen.  
Jesus und Maria.

Da haben die Dornen Rosen getragen,  
Kyrie eleison.  
Als das Kindlein durch den Wald getragen,  
da haben die Dornen Rosen getragen.  
Jesus und Maria.

English translation:

*Mary wandered through a wood of thorns  
Lord, have mercy.  
Mary wandered through a wood of thorns,  
Which was leafless for seven years.  
Jesus and Mary.*

*Who did Mary bear beneath her bosom?  
Lord, have mercy.  
A little babe without pain,  
Whom Mary bore beneath her bosom.  
Jesus and Mary.*

*The thorns had roses there,  
Lord, have mercy.  
As the babe was carried through the woods,*

*There were roses with thorns on them.  
Jesus and Mary.*

### **I Saw Three Ships**

traditional English, arr. Edward Henderson

Canadian work

Our opening set closes with an up-tempo, familiar carol from England. Our friend Ed Henderson's Christmas arrangements for treble and SATB choir are wonderful. This classic carol from the British Isles combines the fire of a Celtic jig with a choir of angels. Sometimes the choir is singing 'call and answer' and at other times imitating cascading bells – all the while the accompaniment is cooking along with its joyful Celtic-drive – great fun and a feature for our pianist, Stephen Smith. This is the first hint of a "bell" theme that comes back several times in the concert.

You can find a recording of this on our "Child of Grace" Christmas CD.

At this point in the program, we welcome our guest children's choir, the Vancouver Bach Children's Chorus and their Music Director and longtime friend of mine and Elektra's, Marisa Gaetanne. The last time this choir performed with us was in 2010, so even the older, singing siblings of these choristers were not likely in the choir yet. Whether instrumentalists or choirs, I always invite our guest artists to "share who you really are" with us. The three pieces performed by the VBCC this year reflect the continuing interest in classical music by this choir and its understanding that kids need to have fun.

### **The Festival of Lights**

traditional Israeli folksong, arranged by Tom Anderson

The Vancouver Bach Choir opens with a song about Hanukkah, which is also known as the Festival of Lights.

### **Laudate Dominum (from Psalm 117)**

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

This is one of Mozart's most famous melodies, perfectly suited to a children's choir and soloist.

Laudate Dominum omnes gentes;  
Laudate eum, omnes populi.  
Quoniam confirmata est  
Super nos misericordia eius,  
Et veritas Domini manet in aeternum.  
Gloria Patri et Filio  
Et Spiritui Sancto  
Sicut erat in principio  
Et nunc, et semper  
Et in saecula saeculorum.  
Amen.

*O praise the Lord, all ye nations;  
praise him, all ye people.  
For his merciful kindness  
is great toward us:  
and the truth of the Lord endureth for ever.  
Praise to the Father and to the Son  
And to the Holy Spirit  
As it was in the beginning,*

*Is now, and ever shall be  
Forever and ever.  
Amen.*

### **The Nutcracker... in about Three Minutes**

Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky, arr. Mark Weston

The VBCC takes us through the most famous moments and melodies of this beloved Christmas-themed work.

I love giving the audience a chance to sing at Christmas, and this year we went with the bell theme in a more contemporary carol, **Silver Bells**, by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans.

### **Los Peces en el Río**

traditional Spanish, arr. Hilario Durán (b. 1953)

Canadian arrangement

Denise O'Brien, Maureen Ciarniello, and Alessia Todde, soloists

To close the first half with both choirs together, a Spanish carol that is apparently a staple of family Christmas singing in Mexico. I heard this in live concert at MusicFest Vancouver, performed by Toronto's Gryphon Trio and singer Patricia O'Callaghan. A little bit of nonsense seems to me to be a key element of Spanish carols. In this one, the fish in the river are drinking and drinking to see Christ born! This fabulous arrangement was written by Cuban-born Canadian pianist, composer, arranger, and educator, Hilario Durán with the virtuosity of the Gryphon Trio in mind. A pleasure for us to collaborate on with Joan Blackman, Rebecca Wenham, and Stephen Smith, our own piano trio, if only for one weekend.

La Virgen se está peinando  
entre cortina y cortina.  
Los cabellos son de oro  
y el peine de plata fina.

Pero mira cómo beben los peces en el río.  
Pero mira cómo beben por ver a Dios nacido.  
Beben y beben y vuelven a beber.  
Los peces en el río por ver a Dios nacer.

La Virgen lleva una rosa  
en su divina pechera  
che se la Dios San Jose  
antes che niño naciera.

Pero mira cómo beben...

La Virgen va caminando,  
va caminando solita.  
Y no lleva más compañía  
Que el iño de su manita.

Pero mira cómo beben...

English translation:

The Virgin is combing her hair  
Between curtains

Her hair is of gold  
The comb of fine silver.

But look how they drink, the fish in the river.  
But look how they drink, to see God born.  
They drink and they drink and they drink again,  
The fish in the river, to see God born.

The Virgin wears a flower  
on her holy heart  
which St. Joseph gave her  
before the child was born.

But look how they drink...

The Virgin is walking,  
She's walking alone,  
She has no other company  
But the Child holding her hand.

But look how they drink...

### **Vetta Chamber Players**

Selections from Reinhold Glière Eight Duets, Op. 39 for violin and cello  
Gavotte • Canzonetta • Intermezzo • Scherzo

First after intermission is a duet without choir for our violinist and cellist, both members of Vetta Chamber Players. In 32 years of concerts, it's surprising that we have never performed with Joan Blackman before, Artistic Director of Vetta, but there's no time like the present. They've chosen four movements from Russian/Soviet composer of German and Polish descent, Reinhold Glière (1875 - 1956), whose repertoire includes symphonies, chamber music, piano music and more.

### **Elektra and Vetta**

**So Hallowed is That Time** (Shakespeare's Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 1)      Stephen Smith (b. 1966)  
(Marcellus to Horatio and Bernardo, after seeing the Ghost)  
Canadian work

We're returning to the magic of Christmas night that is described in so many stories and songs. In the opening scene of Hamlet, Marcellus, a guard at Elsinore, tells his companions of a legend about Christmas night, when "the bird of dawning" sings all night, witches are temporarily powerless, and the night is "wholesome". Our pianist, Stephen Smith, set this short text to music in 2008 for Elektra and Joe Trio, our guest ensemble that year. He combined his love of bird-watching with his love of composition and has this to say about this mystery-infused work:

"The piece begins with the violin, cello, and piano repeating 7 birdsongs\* (in a mostly random fashion) over an ostinato pedal. Each birdsong should have its own tempo and character, and the overall effect should be of a gradually intensifying "dawn chorus", lasting about one minute. ... Following the prelude is a setting of the first two lines of the text (the couplet) and a first refrain. Then the next three lines of the text are set (the tercet), followed by a second refrain. The vocal lines of the second refrain are the retrograde of those in the first refrain, while the violin and cello parts are an augmentation of the canonic parts they played during the first refrain. Similar contrapuntal devices are used throughout, and the whole piece is based on the pitches suggested by the birdsongs."



\* In order of appearance: meadowlark, American robin, mourning dove, wood thrush, red-winged blackbird, rufous-sided towhee, and white-throated sparrow.

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,  
This bird of dawning singeth all night long;  
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,  
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,  
So hallow'd and so gracious is that time.

**O Magnum Mysterium**                      Santiago Veros (b. 1990)  
Jillian Schina, soloist

Still on Christmas night, we come back to a text we featured with cello and organ in the first half. As elegant and beautiful as that work was, this is a contrast, with a spacious, full *a cappella* sound and rich, dramatic treatment of the text. This is the first work we have sung by this young composer.

The Argentine choral composer, Santiago Veros, was born in 1990 in Buenos Aires. At age 7 he began his musical studies and at the age of 18 he moved to La Plata to study Composition at the National University of La Plata. In 2013 he began his professional career as a choral composer writing for the children's choir of the municipality of Pilar in Buenos Aires. Santiago soon internationalizes his art writing for choirs in the Philippines, Chile, USA, South Africa, New Zealand, Taiwan and several countries in Europe. In 2018 he became the first Latin American composer to write music for the largest choral festival in the world, the Europa Cantat 2018 that was held in Tallinn, Estonia. Under his philosophy of joining borders, he has created virtual choirs with people from all over the world, built a global consortium called "The Choral Club" and created works under humanitarian slogans. Currently Santiago Veros works full time as a composer and also offers workshops to encourage the creation of new music and to write music in a community way.

**Little Tree**                                      poem by E. E. Cummings, music by Mark Sirett  
Canadian composition

We pull back from the darkness and richness of character of the last two pieces as we move toward the end of the concert. Kingston, Ontario-based composer Mark Sirett is one of Canada's most prolific and respected choral composers and arrangers. This original composition sets E. E. Cummings' poem about children welcoming a little evergreen tree into the house, to be dressed and lovingly made into something spectacular and meaningful. The original instrumentation was flute, cello, piano, and harp, but we have given the flute's role to the violin and amalgamated the harp and piano parts. It's been a joy to work on this piece again after seven years away, and we are trying to paint the picture of the scene, much as a scene in an opera would unfold.

**Deck the Hall**                                      traditional Welsh, arr. John Rutter

It's time to send our listeners out with a very familiar tune in their heads! John Rutter is Britain's best-known, most prolific and most-published living choral composer. He has a unique sense of melody, and his pieces "sing" beautifully. This charming little arrangement is for SSAA voicing and is over before you know it! Rutter uses slightly unusual words, but the sentiment and sense are the same.

Deck the hall with boughs of holly.  
Fa la la la la, la la la la!

'Tis the season to be jolly.  
Fill the mead cup, drain the barrel.  
Troll the ancient Christmas carol.

See the flowing bowl before us.  
Strike the harp and join the chorus!  
Follow me in merry measure  
While I sing of beauty's treasure.

Fast away the old year passes.  
Hail the new, ye lads and lasses!  
Laughing, quaffing all together,  
Heedless of the wind and weather.

The Vancouver Bach Children's Chorus join us for the final two pieces of the program.

**Carol of the Bells**                      traditional Ukrainian, arr. M. Leontovych

The English language version of this carol, which Elektra is singing, has become part of the English-speaking world's Christmas canon.

**O Little Town of Bethlehem**              Phillip Brooks and Lewis Redner, arr. Susan Edwards (C)

I was looking for a new way to close *Chez Nous: Christmas with Elektra*, so I approached Elektra singer, piano teacher and voice teacher, Susan Edwards, who had arranged *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear* for us a few years ago. I asked her to create a setting of *O Little Town of Bethlehem* that would use both choirs independently and together, and the instrumental forces available to us tonight. I want to take this opportunity to thank Susan for her sensitive arrangement, which we are proud to premiere this weekend.

We hope you will leave the concert refreshed and uplifted through hearing it and everything brought to you in the concert. It's our pleasure to sing for you.

Thanks for reading and for your interest in Elektra.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anna', written in a cursive style.