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## Candlelight, carols, & cathedral

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*Presenting its annual "Candlelight, Carols, & Cathedral" concert for the 20th time, the William Baker Festival Singers continue to add delight to Kansas City's holiday scene.*



Started in 1998, the William Baker Festival Singer's annual *Candlelight, Carols, & Cathedral* concert has become a long-standing holiday tradition for many in Kansas City. This past Friday night, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception was full of generations of audience members, despite

the traffic and sometimes complicated downtown KC parking. Joining the William Baker Festival Singers for the Friday night performance was Allegro Con Spirito, an excellent vocal ensemble of young men grades 7–12 that live in the metro area, directed by Christopher M. Smith.

The selection of the downtown cathedral for this performance always adds an additional layer of stunning beauty to the sound of the ensemble, as the perfect balance and depth of sound the semi-professional choir achieved resonated

throughout the performance space, surrounding and rippling over audience members in a wave of sound. With impeccably timed attacks and releases, the group's collective sound was mesmerizing, as all voiced move as one.

Organist John Schaefer, who served as Canon Musician at Grace & Holy Trinity Cathedral in downtown KC for forty years and is a frequent musical guest, performed the opening voluntary, Pachelbel's *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come*, followed by the Friday night guests, Allegro Con Spirito and director Christopher Smith, situated in the balcony above the audience, with a striking performance of Hildegard von Bingen's antiphon "Karitas." Audience members were asked to rise and invited to join in the singing of several familiar carols throughout the evening: "O Come All Ye Faithful" as the choir processed into the hall, "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" and "O Little Town of Bethlehem" as the guest ensemble took the stage and returned to their seats, and finally everyone joined in on "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" during the final processional. A nice touch to each was the final verse, in which the choral members expanded into rich, full harmonies. Also found throughout the concert were familiar Advent and Christmas readings, done by different members of the Festival Singers, that nicely separated the pieces.

Favorites of this performance were also favorites from last year's, which has both its advantages (knowing audience members will enjoy them) and disadvantages (not presenting new works for those who may only hear the ensemble's Christmas program). Composer-in-residence Ed Frazier Davis' *O Magnum Mysterium*'s playful use of overtones was again enjoyed, along with the rhythmic setting of "Gloria in excelsis" by ensemble member Sean Sweeden, which once again featured Sweeden on percussion and pianist Karen Kay Hall on piano. Another stand out of the night was Norwegian composer Knut Nystedt's *In Principio*. Three brilliant soloists were featured, Abby Judah, Sean Sweeden, and Vince Gover; their vibrant voices ringing clear above the ensemble.

Both the Sweeden and Nystedt works were welcome reliefs after the lengthy setting of Appalachian carols, *Star in the East*, in which the audience members started uncomfortably shifting at the duration as the intermission-free and applause-free concert entered its second hour of performance.

Well-executed singing and impeccable timing on the part of the vocalists more than makes up for the programming monotony, however, and this set of concerts by the William Baker Festival Singers are always a welcome part of the Kansas City Christmas tradition.

#### **REVIEW:**

**William Baker Festival Singers**

***Candlelight, Carols, & Cathedral***