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News

For Release: November 2007

HOLIDAY FORECAST: FRESH-FALLEN SNOWCAROLS FROM CEDILLE RECORDS

*William Ferris Chorale Performs
Founder's Pulitzer-Nominated Composition
On World-Premiere Recording*

The William Ferris Chorale, longtime champion of contemporary and 20th-century composers, is featured on the world-premiere recording of *Snowcarols*, a large-scale work written by the ensemble's founder and namesake and nominated for a 1980 Pulitzer Prize.

In addition to the five-movement, quasi-symphonic *Snowcarols*, the new CD *Snowcarols: Christmas Music by William Ferris* (Cedille Records CDR 90000 101) includes nine more seasonal works by Ferris (1937-2000), a noted composer, choral director, and organist.

Paul French, who succeeded Ferris as the ensemble's music director, conducts the 29-voice choir and 18-piece chamber orchestra. Organist is Paul Nicholson.

In the CD booklet notes, the Chorale's co-founder and current artistic director John Vorrasi describes Ferris's music as informed by Gregorian chant and polyphony, his studies with composer-organist Leo Sowerby, a love for the emotional directness of Verdi and Puccini operas, and a "lyrical gift for long-lined melody."

Chicago Sun-Times music critic Robert C. Marsh described Ferris as "a conservative composer in the best sense of the word. His music makes its points easily and well, but he is innovative and unafraid to write something that makes an immediate appeal through its pure beauty of sound."

Ferris began writing *Snowcarols* during the massive Chicago blizzard of 1979, secluded in his studio at the American Conservatory of Music. He completed it in the fall of 1980.

It's one of several major works Ferris wrote to provide substantial centerpieces for the Chorale's concerts — a conscious departure from the typical choral program made up of many short works. Since much of the large-scale music that appealed to him required choral and instrumental forces beyond the ensemble's early budgets, he wrote his own.

Despite its lighthearted, almost secular-sounding title, *Snowcarols* is deeply religious. Vorrasi calls it “a major work in the guise of something simple and easy.” It comprises settings of five texts: Selwyn Image's “The snow lies thick upon the earth tonight,” the traditional Anglo-Irish “The snow lay on the ground,” Christina Rossetti's “In the bleak mid-winter,” E. Caswell's “See amid the winter's snow,” and Vorrasi's own “Christmas Eve.”

The orchestration of *Snowcarols*, particularly the last movement, shows Ferris at his most inventive and coloristic. “Frolicking woodwinds” and liberal use of a variety of percussion instruments create a feeling of being “caught up in a snowstorm,” Vorrasi writes in the CD booklet.

Christmas was Ferris's favorite holy day. Among the liturgical works he created for Christmas are the nine short works on the CD, all written between 1966 and 1998.

Two of those, “O Mary of Graces” and “Come, Lord, and Tarry Not,” include significant solos for oboe. According to Vorrasi, Ferris “loved the oboe” and its plaintive sound. Ferris played the oboe for a brief time during his student days.

Among his other accomplishments, Ferris was the first American composer to teach at the Vatican. He conducted a concert broadcast of his music over Vatican radio and, for his efforts, was knighted by Pope John Paul II.

The Chorale, founded in 1971, has been acclaimed for concerts of music by Dominick Argento, Samuel Barber, John Corigliano, Gian Carlo Menotti, Ned Rorem, and many others, often with the composers as honored guests. Under Ferris's direction, the Chorale gave more than 160 world, American, and Chicago premieres of important new works.

Composer-conductor Paul French studied composition, conducting, chant, and organ at St. John's University, Northwestern University, the Pontificio Istituto di Musica Sacra in Rome, and privately with Ferris. He was appointed music director of the Ferris Chorale in 2005; under his leadership, the Chorale continues its tradition as an active collaboration between composers, conductor, and singers.

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE') is dedicated to showcasing the most noteworthy classical artists in and from Chicago. The nonprofit label is an arm of The Chicago Classical Recording Foundation. For a free catalog and the locations of local retail outlets, contact Cedille Records, 5255 N. Lakewood Ave., Chicago, IL 60640-2220, call (773) 989-2515; E-mail: info@cedillerecords.org. Cedille Records is distributed by Allegro Corporation in the U.S. and Canada.

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Snowcarols: Christmas Music by William Ferris
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 101)

The Lord Said to Me (4:32)
Gentle Mary (4:45)
Lift Up Your Heads, O Mighty Gates (2:39)
Infant Holy, Infant Lowly (2:37)
O Mary of Graces (3:47)
Long is Our Winter (3:51)
Hail Mary (3:27)
Com, Lord, and Tarry Not (4:05)
Creator of the Stars of Night (3:27)

Snowcarols (36:35)

William Ferris Chorale
Composer Festival Orchestra
Paul French, conductor
Paul Nicholson, organ