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News

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CHRISTMAS A CAPPELLA: NEW HOLIDAY CD CELEBRATES SUBLIME SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

**Chicago *a cappella* Sings Contemporary Choral Works
From Europe, Africa, and North America**

*Mighty Mini-Ensemble Presents
Seven World Premiere Recordings
in Program of 18 Seasonal Songs*

Chicago *a cappella*, the nine-voice choral dynamo known for its innovative programming, vocal versatility, and spirited performances, has gathered 18 seasonal songs from three continents into a holiday album titled *Christmas a cappella: Songs From Around the World* (Cedille Records CDR 90000 107).

The album is “a celebration of the human capacity for wonder and tenderness,” ensemble founder and artistic director Jonathan Miller writes in the CD liner notes.

Described as a “small but powerful vocal ensemble” (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*), the compact choir — comprising a pair of sopranos, mezzos, tenors, and baritones, plus one bass — sings contemporary holiday songs and arrangements from Europe, Africa, and North America — mostly from the past two decades — while giving the recorded premieres of seven of them.

“We have tended to focus on music from our own time, since so much glorious music is being created right now,” Miller writes.

The new recording, taped at sessions at the University of Chicago’s Bond Chapel, consists of audience and ensemble favorites from Chicago *a cappella*’s 14 previous Christmas concerts. Like

those live performances, the new CD is designed to offer a respite from the deluge of predictable and humdrum holiday fare.

“We aim to create a little jewel of a concert ... sung in such a way that the words enter the hearts of everyone present and lodge there for a while,” Miller writes.

The songs range from just over a minute and a half to just under seven minutes in length.

The following songs receive their world premiere recordings on the new CD:

- Wayland Rogers’s *What Sweeter Music* (1998). This beautiful work, dedicated to Chicago *a cappella*, received its world premiere at the ensemble’s first Christmas concert in 1994. Based on a text by 17th-century poet Robert Herrick, the song “moves through a remarkable number of ways at declaiming joy,” Miller notes.
- Steve Pilkington’s *a cappella* choral arrangement of John Jacob Niles’s *I Wonder as I Wander* (2002). The original melody was based partly on an Appalachian folk tune from North Carolina.
- Stacy Garrop’s *Lo Yisa Goy* (2007). Commissioned by Chicago *a cappella*, this is a Hebrew prayer for peace, with Hebrew and English lyrics. The composer writes, “In my research of previous versions of the melody, I discovered three variants for the tune, all of which I have incorporated into my piece.”
- Rosephanye Powell’s *Who is the baby?* (2005). Powell describes this energetic piece as a “Christmas song in the style of the spiritual,” with gospel-like passages of layered sounds and syncopated enthusiasm.
- Jerry J. Troxell’s arrangement of *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* (1981). This is a haunting, hopeful setting of the familiar “Emmanuel” tune. Troxell makes slight rhythmic shifts that heighten the sense of anticipation in the text.
- Carol Barnett’s *Hodie* (1998). The well-known text (*Hodie* is Latin for “Today”) is from the Magnificat antiphon at Second Vespers on Christmas Day. Barnett says her piece has

been influenced by the music of Rachmaninoff and Poulenc. Holst's influence is evident in the textural groupings of women versus men.

- James Clemens's arrangement, *Jingle a cappella* (2003). Written for Chicago *a cappella*, this treatment gives the James Pierpoint tune a jazz-inflected tinge, while the middle section is a wild fugue in 7/8 time, based on Bach.

Among the songs by composers from outside the U.S are:

- Nigerian composer Christian Onyeji's *Amuwo ro ayi out nwa* (2005). With text from Isaiah in the Igbo language, the work has a driving and jubilant quality owing to elements of dance, polyrhythm, and local musical textures.
- Eleanor Daley's arrangement of *The Huron Carol* (2005). The Toronto-based composer created this choral version of the oldest known Canadian carol. Its original words were in the Huron language, with a tune from 16th-century New France.
- Ian Humphris's arrangement of *Noël nouvelet* (1986). The British composer's creation is a delicate setting of a traditional French carol-about-a-carol.
- Per Nørgård's *En stjerne er sat* (1961). This is the influential Danish composer's *a cappella* setting of a section from his earlier Christmas oratorio. The song's consistent triple meter communicates the sense of a steady walk toward Bethlehem.
- Enrico Oweggi's *Nyathi Onyuol* (1996). The Kenyan composer fuses traditional and neo-traditional African tunes with exuberant and intense quasi-Western harmonic style. Chicago *a cappella* features a "vocal percussionist" covering the drum part.

In addition to the American works among the world premieres, the CD offers J. David Moore's lively setting of the popular French carol *Il est Né, le Divin Enfant* (2004), Stephen Paulus's *Splendid Jewel* (2003), Gwyneth Walker's *The Christ Child's Lullaby* (1990), Richard Proulx's *Prayer of the Venerable Bede* (1982), Joshua Jacobson's arrangement of Chaim Parchi's *Aleith Neiri* (1990), and Howard Helvey's *O Lux Beatissima* (2004).

The 32-page CD booklet provides song texts in the original languages and in English translations.

This is Chicago *a cappella*'s first holiday CD for Cedille Records and has no overlap with the professional ensemble's earlier, self-released *Holidays a cappella Live* (which has a different version of *The Huron Carol*).

The new CD was produced by Patrick Sinozich, music director of Chicago *a cappella*, and James Ginsburg of Cedille Records and engineered by two-time Grammy-nominee Bill Maylone.

Christmas a cappella is the ensemble's second recording for Cedille Records. Its Cedille debut, *Shall I Compare Thee?: Choral Songs on Shakespeare Texts* (Cedille Records CDR 90000 085) was hailed by a reviewer for the contemporary music Web site Sequenza21.com, who called it "More fun than human beings should be allowed ... the most addictive CD to come my way in a long time." The reviewer described the ensemble as "some kind of magic blend of the great old jazz group, the Hi-Los, with a little Double Six of Paris and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir thrown in."

Grammy award-winning 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, by Metronome Distribution in the U.K., and by other independent distributors in major international classical music markets. Web site: www.cedillerecords.org.

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