

### **Meditations of the “Festival of Carols”**

*“Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.” —Maya Angelou*

Not long ago, NPR radio presented a program on the “epidemic” of loneliness in the US, especially among young adults and the elderly. There were many suggestions by the experts on how to combat it, including joining online groups of interest. I waited for some mention of the value of singing and finding a choir – but in vain. Despite a wealth of research showing the health benefits of singing in a choir and being a member of a choir community, there was no suggestion of music as an antidote to loneliness. Indiana, and Indianapolis in particular, are rich in secular and sacred large and small choir communities. If you are like me, you may have been told at an early age you could not sing and would be excluded from choral activities. What utter nonsense! Most people can sing, and with some voice lessons and practice, can become competent choral musicians. With age, there may be a loss of flexibility, a gain in weight, a decline in sight and hearing – none of which need impair your ability to sing. The approximately 150 volunteer members of the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir represent a wide diversity of humans, young and old adults, some frail, some hard of hearing, some who learn by listening, some who learn by reading music, some who have sung from infancy, and some, like me, who learnt to sing after retirement.

Until you join a choir, you may not be aware of the huge diversity of the choral music repertoire, and the exciting new choral compositions offered each year. Yes, some of the glorious works may be by those eminent dead white men, but we sing works by composers who are women, by composers of color, by composers around the world and by LGBTQIA+ composers. If there are some notes strung in melody with words, we’ll be singing it in harmony! Our “Festival of Carols” this year has a wonderful program of the old classics, new compositions, silly songs with a few high jinks, and contemporary carols. Come, listen and lose any loneliness in the listening and joy of being at one with the choir, orchestra, conductor, audience. There’s even the opportunity to stand at the end, celebrate and roar your heart out in the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s “Messiah”.

When I first opened the package of music for this concert, I gave a gasp of delight when I saw we would be singing the American composer, Randall Thompson’s “Alleluia”. I have wanted to sing this since encountering the music sheet and recordings several years ago. Michael Davis, ISC Assistant Artistic Director, has been wanting to conduct it for even longer. The work was commissioned in 1940 by Serge Koussevitzky, the Director of the Tanglewood Festival, and written in 5 days. Koussevitzky asked for a joyful piece of music as a choral fanfare of sound. Thompson, deeply affected by the World War 2 in Europe, and the recent fall of France to the Nazis in early 1940, felt he could not compose something joyous. Instead, this “Alleluia” with its intensity and repetitions, reflects a mood many of us may be feeling with so many nations at war today, and so many tragedies of broken families, horrendous injuries to ordinary men and women caught up in these wars, and the loss of comforting homes. Allow yourself to fall into the spell the choir will weave as they sing this – listen to the changing dynamics, the harmonic rhythms and the increasing tempo as the music becomes highly intense near the end, before reverting to a quiet reflective end (especially listen at the end for the gorgeous alto sound on their low and prolonged A note that supports the Amen of the other singers). Breathe for hope around the world for a few moments before you show your appreciation with applause.

I was happy to see we would be singing a work “Ring the Bells” by the eminent living composer, Rosephanye Powell. She is an acclaimed and popular African American composer, singer,

music educator and researcher dedicated to the preservation and performance of African-American spirituals and gospel music. I first came across her songs as a member of the global virtual Stay-at-Home Choir (SAHC) during covid when we learnt "Arise, Beloved". SAHC arranged an interview with her, later posted as a blog: <https://stuff.stayathomechoir.com/a-day-in-the-life-of-choral-composer-rosephanye-powell/> . Ms Powell also coached several zoom sessions to explain her approach: *"I always start with the words when I'm composing. For me, my inspiration is always the poetry. When a singer or conductor picks up a song, it should be because of the poetry, and what the music says about the poetry – how it impacts them. Then the conductor conveys that message to the choir with their words and directions. Then it's up to the singers to embrace the poetry, understand how the music enhances the storytelling, and engage the audience with it. The receiver is the audience. The rest of us are just conduits – there to tell the story, which all begins with the poet."*

Enjoy listening to her rousing harmonies, insistent rhythm, and the sheer joy and excitement of the choir singing "Ring the Bells," which will be conducted by ISC Composing Fellow, Kiki Porter.

Both these composers (and many others) were inspired by Bach, so we cannot leave him out. Eric Stark, ISC Artistic Director, will conduct the choir in a truly lovely chorale from Bach's "Christmas Oratorio", BWV248. We have come a long way coming up to speed on the tempo we sing this. Bach is always challenging, and giving clarity to his words and truth to his harmony and counterpoint takes hard work, patience and persistence from singers and conductor. Enjoy the way Bach has woven a tapestry of sound for the singers, and marvel at music written to be sung at Christmas by 2 church choirs in Leipzig in 1734, which still speaks to us today.

To return to my original theme: Christmas can be a lonely time for many. Gather up your friends and family to make the trek to Clowes Hall on the Butler University campus, or to the Palladium in Carmel, and enter the magical world of songs and music next week. Tickets may be purchased at [www.indychoir.org](http://www.indychoir.org).

Enjoy our concert, and then search online for choirs in Indiana or Indianapolis to find your voice and a new community of friends.