

# The Chronicle Herald - Halifax

## Annual King's concert unforgettable

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Surprises include readings by Alexander MacLeod

For four years now, Paul Halley has been designing annual King's Christmas concerts to avoid "something predictable and merely entertaining" as he wrote in his program note to the 2011 concert of the King's College Chapel Choir he directs.

And that is why this annual festival of song and story is red-lettered on December calendars all over Metro Halifax and beyond.

Sunday afternoon and evening, following concerts Friday and Saturday nights in Lunenburg and Wolfville, there were hardly enough seats in the vastness of the Cathedral Church of All Saints to hold everybody who wanted a piece of this annual magic.

It is not just the fine, sweet, disciplined singing of the King's College Chapel choristers. A sensation of unearthly beauty floated like a luminous mist right into our imaginations when they slowly walked down the central aisle from the back of the church to begin the concert, as they did Sunday afternoon, singing a late 13th century Latin poem, arranged by Halley.

Halley's musical imagination includes a pallet of contemporary harmonic sonorities, modal excursions like sun flares briefly dazzling our ears with unexpected flashes of remote keys, chromatic passages passing through expected sounds like rosy dawns and crimson dusks.

And then, just when something is needed to go over the top, the choir's highest voices launch into a descant that rises into the air and illuminates the final verse like the moon suddenly breaking out and lighting up a landscape.

Halley's original descants are masterpieces.

The repertoire was also full of surprise, ranging from medieval matins and renaissance responsories to the holy minimalism of John Tavener. And the audience got to join the choir, alternating in singing verses and then singing together the finales of familiar carols like Once in David's Royal City at the start of the concert and Hark the Herald Angels Sing at the end.

And in the middle there was It Came upon a Midnight Clear in a non-standard arrangement of the traditional English carol.

Halley conducted the choir, and when he stepped over to the organ bench behind them, Nick Halley emerged from the choir to direct them. Halley has his own choir, the Capella Regalis Men's and Boys' Choir, who will present their own concert, To Bethlehem with King's, Dec. 20, at First Baptist Church, Halifax.

The surprises in this concert continued throughout with eight readings by award-winning Nova Scotia writer Alexander MacLeod. He did not read from his own work, except for a witty new piece of his on the King's choir, called Music Ensemble.

His reading list included Newfoundland's Carmelita McGrath, P.E.I.'s Milton Acorn and Nova Scotia's Elizabeth Bishop. He included an excerpt from Alistair MacLeod's No Great Mischief, and even managed to work in W.H. Auden's A Christmas Oratorio and Lucy Maud Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables.

And also, expectedly, he read the second chapter of Luke with its memorable words about the shepherds and the star and the manger and the babe.

This unforgettable concert was recorded Sunday night by CBC and will be broadcast nationally on Radio 2 at 7 p.m. on Christmas Eve (music only) as A King's Christmas.

The full concert, with music and narration, will be broadcast regionally on Radio One (Atlantic Airwaves) at 5:05 p.m. on Christmas Day.

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