

Halley's Comment

Paul Halley's letter to the audience in the program notes for the King's at the Cathedral Series:

"A King's Christmas 2009" concert featuring The Chapel Choir of the University of King's College with special guest, Suzie LeBlanc, soloist and Dr. Neil Robertson, narrator.

Cathedral of All Saints, Halifax, Nova Scotia - December 13, 2009 - 7:30 p.m.

Concert recorded by CBC for national broadcast in Canada on Christmas Day, CBC Radio One and Radio Two.

Dear Friends,

Welcome to A King's Christmas 2009, our second of what I hope will be many annual performances. It is indeed my hope, because in the midst of all the usual non-musical things one has to do to get a production like this up and running, I also have to sit down with Neil Robertson and choose which poems and stories will work best in which places. This is a privilege for which many people would pay good money and apparently it makes me the envy of a significant number of Haligonians. It also forces me to take the time to carefully consider the words of all the carols and readings we perform each year. And since this season is all about the Word made flesh, such an exercise may prove to be one of the most enlivening and inspiring aspects of my work.

The great thing about choirs is that they get to sing some of the finest texts ever penned by writers through the ages. Instrumentalists miss out in this regard. The text that seems to constitute the centrepiece of this year's programme is the "O Magnum Mysterium", in which the great mystery, the marvellous sacrament, is that animals should see the new-born Lord, lying in their manger. The marvellous and the mundane are brought together in the understanding that the Saviour of the world may be found in the last place one would look, whether one is a cow or a human. This Franciscan desire to learn from nature how to praise God, how to worship the Lord of Heaven and Earth, pervades a great many of the texts sung or said this evening. Neil Robertson was interested to discover how many of his readings are about God's creations – roosters, thrushes, wolves and lambs, oxen, sheep and even crying stones. And the text I chose to set for this year's concert is by the 18th century English poet Christopher Smart, who wrote many of his most famous poems while an inmate at St. Luke's Hospital for Lunatics. He too is looking for the "stupendous stranger" and is led to the manger. Like St. Francis (and Olivier Messiaen) he recognizes divine worship in the songs of chaffinches and blackbirds; "Spinks and ouzels sing sublimely, 'We too have a Saviour born'".

If all nature knows the "all-bounteous, all-creative God", whose nativity makes him "a native, Of the very world he made", then there's hope for us too. And, speaking of songbirds, it is something of a marvel that Suzie LeBlanc is singing with us this evening. We are fortunate in that she seems to be spending more of her time in Nova Scotia. Perhaps she too will end up a native. Thank you for joining us this evening. I hope these offerings of song and story will afford you the opportunity for reflection and restoration, so that with the Prophet Isaiah, we can say with reasonable hope, "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord."

Yours, Paul Halley