

Program notes for *Holy Mysteries, Holy Miracles*, Nov, 30, 2011

Welcome to the Ottawa Choral Society's evening of Holy Miracles, featuring three Persian Kings and an extremely gifted Saint.

The first half of the concert celebrates the journey of the three Kings as they are led to the infant Jesus. Their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were the very first Christmas presents, offered many centuries before Saint Nicolas, in his modern incarnation of Santa Claus, carried on the tradition.

As we journey toward the manger, the well-known broadcaster and music commentator, Eric Friesen, opens the program with a reading of *The Journey of the Magi*, T.S. Eliot's enigmatic contemplation of the meaning of the nativity. With this concert, history seems determined to repeat itself as Eric remembers having committed this great poem to memory, and recited it in one of his earliest public performances, as a lad in Grade Eight. We will see a serendipitous and parallel return to subject with James McLean, this evening's Saint Nicolas.

The Ottawa Choral Society follows with an anthology of beautiful carols about the three star-led chiefs that range from traditional to contemporary interpretations, both *a cappella* and accompanied. Most striking about this collection of carols is their disparateness of style – the take that each composer gives to a similar theme in his use of a wide array of choral devices and effects. *Lo! Star-led Chiefs* by English composer William Crotch (1775-1847) reflects an almost Mozartian elegance, while the modern setting of the ancient poem *Lully, Lulla*, by English composer Kenneth Leighton (1929-1988), displays modern-sounding harmonic dissonances and time signature variations, and the ethereal harmonies of *The Three Kings*, by Canadian Healey Willan (1880-1968), evoke, in deep contrast, the gentleness of the nativity scene and the awesome power of the Almighty.

In the second half of the program, Benjamin Britten's magnificent *Saint Nicolas Cantata* chronicles the life and miracles of the legendary holy magician. The work has been performed in Ottawa many times. I have participated in several of those performances and would like to share my memories of them with you.

I remember clearly the first time I was part of this work, in about 1970. I wasn't sure at first what a "pickled boy" was, but that was the role I was to sing. As one of the three small St. Matthew's 'pickled' choirboys, on cue, I was required to walk up the nave, over and over again, singing 'Alleluia' 'Alleluia', because our choirmaster and long-time Ottawa Choral Society director, Brian Law, made us practice until the lengthy walk to the front of the church was precisely timed with the music.

Over the years, several fine tenors have portrayed the beloved saint. As I recall, Albert Greer was Ottawa's first Nicolas – a performance that was as dramatic as could ever be hoped for, with his voice of sheer beauty and his fine musical intelligence.

In 1976, in a musical coup, Brian Law was able to engage the legendary lyric tenor, Sir Peter Pears – Benjamin Britten's partner and the creator of the role – to sing the role of Nicolas. There were to be two nights; the first in Montreal, the next in Ottawa. Sadly, Britten's health took a sudden turn for the worst, and he was given only a short time to live. Pears stoically remained in

Montreal that night and sang the role, even managing to sing the last words of the cantata (“I bless Thy name, who lived and died for me, and dying, yield my soul to Thee”) without losing his composure. It was the members of the chorus who wept as we sang those words so laden with significance... The next morning, Pears flew back to Britten’s bedside while the OCS scoured North America for a replacement. Seth McCoy flew in from the U.S. and sang the role with enormous dignity and feeling.

Flash forward a number of years: Yours Truly actually sang the role of Nicolas under the baton of Matthew Larkin! — as did Dillon Parmer, professor of music at the University of Ottawa. The celebrated Metropolitan Opera star, Canadian tenor John Mac Master, was a fine Nicolas in 2002 with the OCS under Iwan Edwards, as was Canadian tenor Glyn Evans in 1992, also under Iwan.

Coming full circle, in December, 1981, Brian Law hired a young tenor named James McLean to sing Nicolas. Based in Toronto, James had already been singing professionally for a few years and I’d previously made his acquaintance when he was a counselor at choir camp. Tonight, thirty years after having sung the part in Ottawa, during which time he has displayed his fine voice around the world, we’re very excited to have James McLean back in town.

Before I turn you over to Brian Law’s own very insightful description of the Saint Nicolas Cantata I’d like to wish you all a memorable concert: sit back and enjoy, conjure up images of far-away moonlit journeys, but have your vocal cords warmed up and ready to sing!

*Kevin Reeves*

## **Saint Nicolas**

*Saint Nicolas* is scored for tenor solo, main chorus, a gallery chorus of children’s voices, piano duet, organ, strings and percussion. The work was composed for the centenary celebrations of Lancing College, Sussex, in 1948. St. Nicolas was Bishop of Myra in the fourth century. Most of what is known about him is conjecture based on legends. One of the world’s most popular saints, he is the original Father Christmas, the patron saint of sailors and children, of countries and cities, and also of pawnbrokers!

As the cantata begins, imagine yourself in a candlelit cathedral on December 6, where a priest is celebrating mass in honour of St. Nicolas’ Feastday. Out of the darkness a blinding vision of the saint appears, in full episcopal regalia. The awed congregation beg the vision to speak, to show the real Nicolas - the man within the saint. There is a rush of wind and a flickering of candles, and Nicolas addresses them. He reminisces and exhorts the congregation to preserve the living faith for which their fathers fought and died. The congregation prays for the strength to heed Nicolas’ words as the vision slowly fades back into the darkness.

As the story of his life begins, Nicolas is being born to an enchantingly happy waltz tune! The legends of his birth and youth are naively recounted, each to a charmingly varied accompaniment. At the end of each verse the tiny saint-to-be sings "God be Glorified!" At the conclusion (a splendid moment, this) the young boy is transformed into the adult saint as the tenor sings the culminating "God be Glorified!"

In the following recitative and aria the young man Nicolas, upon the death of his parents, discovers the miseries of his fellow-men. In the aria - andante molto lento - the dark accompaniment with its pulling semitones depicts Nicolas' distress at this inability to find inner peace. It is only when he prays for humility that he is answered: the strings quieten as their semitones float upward and the discords come to rest in a tranquil pianissimo cadence.

Nicolas' sea journey to Palestine is now recounted in a swinging 12/8 melody which evokes the rolling of the ship and the slapping of waves against the hull. Nicolas prophesies a storm ahead but is scorned by the crew. The wind and waves mount, the thunder roars and the full fury of the storm hits the ship. The sailors are panic-stricken, the distant gallery chorus echoes the wailing of the wind and the sailors cry to God for mercy. In answer to Nicolas' call the storm slowly abates. In the stillness Nicolas offers a penitential prayer: "O God, pity our simplicity, for we are truly pitiable in Thy sight!" The ship sails on over calm, moonlit waters: the melody is transformed into the major key as Nicolas, realizing God's abiding presence, gently weeps.

Now we are at Nicolas' enthronement as Bishop of Myra; in an energetic fugue the choir exhorts the bishop to "serve the Faith and spurn His enemies". At the climax the fugue breaks off, and the twenty-first-century audience/congregation join in the singing of the great hymn *All People that on Earth do Dwell*.

In the next episode, the land is smitten with famine, and hunger-marchers are on the roads moving toward the city. Voices mourn the disappearance of three little boys. Rich travellers at an inn order a meal and invite Bishop Nicolas to join them. With prophetic awareness Nicolas perceives that the meat about to be served is the flesh of the three lost boys. (They had been killed and pickled in salt!) Before the astonished onlookers he brings them back to life.

The congregation then recall Nicolas' forty years as their pastor. They recount the various events/legends of his episcopacy.

Finally, St. Nicolas hears the summons of death. During his last prayer - an ecstatic cry of joy, for now he will see God! - the choir murmurs the *Nunc Dimittis*. As Nicolas grows weaker the chorus swells triumphantly to the *Gloria Patri* and *Amen*. When the echoes of the immense orchestral chord have died, the distant organ can be heard announcing a hymn, and the cantata ends with everyone singing *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*.

(c) *Brian Law*