

Two premieres add breadth to Seraphic Fire Christmas

December 11, 2018 By [Greg Stepanich](#)



The Nativity at Night (1490), by Geertgen tot Sint Jans.

Seraphic Fire's Christmas concerts have become more than a South Florida tradition over the Miami choir's 17 seasons.

This year's holiday program was first heard in Vermont and Connecticut at the beginning of the month before the group returned home and opened a long series of Christmas concerts that will last through Dec. 16. The singers opened their Florida shows Thursday at St. Gregory's Episcopal in Boca Raton, reprising a lineup they did about eight years ago, but with two new additions.

Concertmaster James Bass led the program, which had two compositional premieres: *All Beautiful the March of Days*, by James Kallembach, and *Jesús en pesebre*, an arrangement of two versions of *Away in a Manger* by Seraphic Fire's founder, Patrick Dupré Quigley.

Kallembach, who teaches at the University of Chicago, based his carol on a 1912 text by the American hymn writer Frances Wile, long familiar in its setting to Ralph Vaughan Williams's arrangement of the English folksong *Forest Green*. Kallembach's tune is very traditionally oriented, easy to remember and full of rich harmonies, and would fit more or less snugly into any church hymnal you'd care to name.

The Quigley arrangement uses W.J. Kirkpatrick's setting of the *Away in a Manger* text, but in Spanish, and alternates it with the melody by James R. Murray to the same text in English. The Spanish-language text gave the Kirkpatrick hymn a welcome feeling of freshness that distanced it from its squeaky-clean Sunday school manner, and for the Murray tune, Quigley gives it to a soprano soloist, in this case Seraphic Fire veteran Sara Guttenberg. She sang it with pop music casualness, which was very effective.

I think Quigley's arrangement would work well for school choirs, offering English-language singers a chance to learn some Spanish and the accompanying diction, and it offers a solo spot for a talented young singer. It deserves wider currency.

The concert unfolded in usual Seraphic Fire fashion for these events, and as conductor Bass suggested, that's probably all to the good, lest inboxes groan with complaints from returning auditors. The group made good use of the St. Gregory's space, beginning the concert with a good deal of Gregorian chant — the *Pater Noster*, *Ave Maria*, *Kyrie* and of course, *Adeste fideles* — interspersed with French composer Maurice Durufle's Marian motet *Tota pulchra es* and the David Willcocks arrangement of *O Come, All Ye Faithful*.

All these pieces found the 13-voice choir in good form, the men, who were standing in the back of the church for the chants, unfolding a feeling of smooth timelessness, and the full ensemble sounding like what they are: Superbly trained individual musicians uniting in a white-toned, seamless blend.

Soprano Sarah Moyer sounded very much like a boy treble in her solo stanza for *Once in Royal David's City*, evoking the King's College Chapel annual festival of lessons and carols, which always begins with Henry Gauntlett's hymn. The choir sang only a little more of it after that before going into well-managed readings of John Rutter's *Quem pastores laudeverere* and Morten Lauridsen's *O magnum mysterium*. Bass noted the eminent position in choral music Lauridsen's piece occupies (its popularity paid for his daughter's college education); the singers gave the music the unbroken serenity it needs, and best of all, those low D's in the closing stanza.

Along those same lines was John Tavener's *The Lamb*, with its beautiful recurring refrain coming after much more unsettled harmonies. Bass and the choir did these sections

exquisitely, with hushed dynamics and an air of real reverence. It was followed by a Seraphic Fire favorite, the English composer Elizabeth Poston's *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*, with lovely solo work by Rebecca Myers and Cait Frizzell. The chorus walked off the stage to the sides of the sanctuary to enter in canon for the last lines, an effect that always works and impresses audiences. St. Gregory's was somewhat dead, reverb-wise, probably in part because of the large audience, so it didn't have quite the sonic thrill it usually does.

After a Quigley arrangement of Franz Gruber's *Silent Night*, the chorus returned for a Willcocks version of the traditional British carol *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*, figgy pudding and all. This was a highly polished, carefully sung collection of Christmas art pieces, even in the well-known carols.

If there's a criticism to be made here, it's that there is a scholarly reserve in this lineup of songs that could be leavened with some more melodically generous music in future concerts. It's hard to see how that would take away from this group's record of holiday accomplishment or the musical gift it offers each year to its grateful listeners.

Seraphic Fire's *Christmas program can be heard Tuesday at All Saints Episcopal in Fort Lauderdale; Wednesday at St. Sophia Greek Orthodox in Miami; Thursday at Vanderbilt Presbyterian in Naples; Friday at First United Methodist in Coral Gables; and Sunday afternoon at the South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center in Cutler Bay. For tickets, call 305-285-9060 or visit seraphicfire.org.*