



Distinguished Concerts International New York (DCINY) presents Sounds of the Season: The Music of Mark Hayes and Pepper Choplin in Review

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PEPPER CHOPLIN, COMPOSER/CONDUCTOR; MARK HAYES, COMPOSER/CONDUCTOR;
TODD ARANT, HEATHER CHOPLIN, NARRATORS
DISTINGUISHED CONCERTS ORCHESTRA; DISTINGUISHED CONCERTS SINGERS
INTERNATIONAL
STERN AUDITORIUM AT CARNEGIE HALL, NEW YORK, NY DECEMBER 2, 2019

Distinguished Concerts International New York (DCINY) concluded its 2019 concert season on December 2nd with a concert entitled *Sounds of the Season: The Music of Mark Hayes and Pepper Choplin*. It featured original works by Mr. Hayes and Mr. Choplin, along with arrangements of holiday favorites. Singers (the program listed 537!) from Arizona, Arkansas, California, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Mississippi, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Virginia, Austria, Canada, and the United Kingdom were present to fill the hall with holiday cheer. Thanks to DCINY for making the program available for viewing on-line: [Sounds of the Season: The Music of Mark Hayes and Pepper Choplin](#).

Pepper Choplin took to the stage to conduct his work *Heaven's Child*. Mr. Choplin is a DCINY favorite (this is his 8th appearance with DCINY). His ebullience is always front-and-center, inspiring those under his direction to reflect his boundless energy. His fans are legion – he knows just what they love, and he never fails to delight them.



The Holiday Music of Mark Hayes and Pepper Choplin. Photo Credit: Dan Wright Photography/DCINY Productions

Heaven's Child is a ten-movement, forty-minute work. Quoting Mr. Choplin, "*Heaven's Child* is a poetic telling of Divinity come to earth. The language

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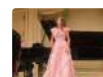
Pro Musicis
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Gregory in Review

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Distinguished
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Vissi D'arte
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of the music and narration is not meant to be literal, but serves to open our imagination to discover the Christmas truth.”

Heaven's Child is quintessential Choplin, full of unfailing optimism, beautiful soaring melodies, abundant climaxes, and avoidance of anything harmonically jarring beyond passing tones. The music is peppered (no pun intended) with quotes from standards (*Adeste Fideles*, *Angels We Have Heard on High*, *We Three Kings*, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*) throughout.

Narrators Heather Choplin and Todd Arant were excellent in their role. They projected well, even with the large forces sometimes making it a challenge to hear them. The story they told was compelling and unapologetically “religious,” which I did admire, but I did find that referring to God as “the master composer” was a bit much. Special mention for soloists Teri Modelevsky, Stephanie de Jong, Jessica Isaacs, and Colton Ranguette; you all were stars tonight. The orchestra and chorus wrung every last drop of euphoria in a performance that was truly inspiring to witness.

This type of music presents a challenge to the reviewer as how to comment. The lack of tension (harmonically and otherwise) can seem trite very quickly, yet it is that very quality that this style of composition invites. One could argue (and rightfully so) that you do not compare Praise Music with standard concert hall works. Of all the ten movements, *Newborn Cry* was this listener's favorite, for the reason of differentiation from the other movements in matters of tone and mode. Perhaps I'll leave the last word to an audience member seated near me, who was heard to say, “It's so beautiful! I could listen to this music all night long!” Her enthusiasm was shared by most in the hall, who leapt to their feet in a loud ovation.

Mark Hayes took the podium for the concert's second half to conduct his *Magnificat* and *Sounds of the Season*, along with his arrangements of six other works. Mr. Hayes is also a DCINY favorite (this is his 7th appearance with DCINY). As I wrote of Mr. Hayes in an earlier review, “While Mr. Hayes is skilled in all aspects of composition, it is his undeniable gift for melodic writing that is his calling card.” That quality was much in evidence this evening.

His *Magnificat*, which takes its text from Luke 1:46-55, opened the half. Mr. Hayes alternates Latin with English, which he has often done in his works. His setting has rhythmic drive and some angular harmonic lines, yet also moments of serene beauty. He tops it off with a quasi-baroque fugue at the ending, culminating in a final shout of Amen. It was a thrilling ten

minutes. One cavil – the fugue was a challenge for the chorus that was not entirely met, though hardly a disaster. It is difficult with forces of this size to have the crispness of sound to avoid muddling the counterpoint.

Next up was Mr. Hayes' other original composition, *Sounds of the Season*. It's a brief (about three -minute) work that takes inspiration from *Carol of the Bells*. The chorus shone brightly, with good projection, diction, and ensemble balance. Without break, Mr. Hayes launched the orchestra and chorus into a medley of *It's Beginning to Look Like Christmas* and *It's the Most Wonderful Time of Year. Believe* (from the movie *The Polar Express*) followed. Another extended medley followed, with *Winter Wonderland of Snow* (a pairing of *Winter Wonderland* and *Let It Snow! Let it Snow! Let it Snow!*), *Sing We Now of Christmas*, and Variations on *Jingle Bells*. This set can be simply described as a pure celebration of the season, delivered with ebullience. While each work was entertaining, it was the Variations on *Jingle Bells* that was a real showstopper. Mr. Hayes describes it as "a journey of multi-meter madness, a holiday waltz, a jazzy swing section, a Baroque detour complete with operatic diva and cadenza, and a splashy ending worthy of Barbra Streisand." That all sounds a bit corny, but it was madcap fun that even an ultra-curmudgeonly Scrooge would have found irresistible. Soprano soloist Candice Helfand-Rogers brought the house down with her humor-filled "Diva," but make no mistake, while the act was good fun, her voice is the real deal. The "Hollywood blockbuster" finish was the icing on the cake, and the audience roared in approval. Congratulations to DCINY for a great night, and Happy Holidays to all!



by [Jeffrey Williams](#) for New York Concert Review; New York, NY

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