

From the choir loft, glad tidings of great joy

Thanks to angelic voices, the Christmas spirit lives despite a pandemic's gloom

By [Thomas Farragher](#) Globe Columnist, Updated December 11, 2021, 3:04 p.m.



Richard Clark is the director of music for the Archdiocese of Boston and the Cathedral of the Holy Cross. He warmed up with the choir in the choir loft and then directed during the 11:30 a.m. Mass last Sunday, Dec. 5. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Soon, he will be at his post high above the congregation at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, coaxing impossibly beautiful music from a pitch-perfect choir as the late-morning sun slants through stained glass and the faithful — bathed in that kaleidoscopic light — bow in prayer.

But now, 90 minutes before a Christmas-season Mass, Richard J. Clark is in the church basement. And he is at work.

He is a composer, a conductor, an organist, a pianist, and — at this moment — a teacher.

“Let’s not be afraid to be strong on your entrances here,” he tells his 20-member choir, rehearsing for its performance at the Second Sunday of Advent Mass.



Richard Clark is the director of music for the Archdiocese of Boston and the Cathedral of the Holy Cross. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

“Lovely,” he finally pronounces moments before services begin. “You guys are getting the feel of this very nicely.”

Very nicely? Call him a master of understatement.

The seasonal music he and his choir are making on this Sunday morning is something more than just nice. Stirring is one way to put it. Profound is another.

And in this season of the pandemic, when masks are mandatory and fear floats invisibly in the air, there is something else informing the sounds coming from Clark’s choir loft.

It sounds like hope.

“I’m actually older than everyone else here — to be blunt,” said 64-year-old Taras Leschishin, a Ukrainian and leader of the choir’s bass section. “So, I’ve worked with many conductors and I find that Richard brings a musical expertise but also a patient and charitable joy.

“He’s kind and gentle. He’s demanding. But not in a derogatory way or in a way that makes you feel nervous about producing. He has a lighthearted way of getting the best out of us.”

That’s no easy feat anywhere these days when, even in this season of light and hope, there are medical bulletins and death counts. And decidedly muted celebrations amid all those songs about great joy.

Great joy?

That's what Clark's boss hears when he celebrates Mass in the sanctuary far below Clark's post in the choir loft at the 146-year-old puddingstone church on Washington Street.

"Good preaching and good music are paramount in the life of the church," said Cardinal Sean O'Malley, the archbishop of Boston. "And the parishes that are doing the best are parishes where there is good preaching and good music.

"We've very blessed to have Richard Clark. It is truly a ministry. And it's an act of faith and worship for him."

It's also the culmination of a long journey that began in New York's Greenwich Village and his boyhood on Long Island.

"I was either 8 or 9 when I said to myself, 'To be a church musician has to be the lowest musical aspiration possible.' I was a little frustrated," said Clark, now 52. "I didn't realize the richness of the history of the church. It's a cornerstone of Western music. The irony there is that I made a career in church music. And here we are today."

Clark, a composer, conductor, organist, pianist, and songwriter, was for nearly 30 years the music director at St. Cecilia Church in Boston and is a former chapel organist at Boston College.

His compositions have been performed on four continents. He's had recitals in Belgium and Italy and France. He's been elected to the National Music Honor Society.

He lives in Milton with his wife and four children. And, on this Sunday, he

reminds his choir to stagger their breathing, as his 7-year-old red-haired son Sean sits in a chair to the right of his father at the organ.



Monsignor Kevin O'Leary (purple vestments) celebrated Holy Communion. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

And then it's time for Monsignor Kevin O'Leary, the cathedral's rector, to read from the Gospel according to St. Luke and to preach about God's homecoming.

"What did Jesus see in us that he would become like us?" O'Leary asked during his Sunday homily.

Later, he called Clark's music and choir uplifting, spiritual — an essential ingredient to the celebration of the season.

"Richard has the energy and he has the knowledge and he has a charismatic way

with his singers,” O’Leary, my old parish priest from Scituate, told me after Mass. “They feel a part of this endeavor.

“When you hear these Scriptures, when you hear this music, when you have this beautiful worship space, it does help people to look at the world in a different way.”



The Cathedral Choir warms up. From left are tenors Stephen Artner, Gregory Merklin, and Michael Gonzalez, and baritone Taras Leschishin, and bass Ed Fee. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

As the choir assembled at the cathedral on Sunday, its members wore suit coats and ties, down jackets, and colorful sweaters and vests. The masks they wore did little to diminish the power of their song.

On Jordan’s bank the Baptist’s cry

Announces that the Lord is nigh

Awake and hearken for he brings

Glad tidings of the King of kings

O'Leary incenses the altar. Clark bows his head in prayer during the canon and the reading of the mysteries of faith.

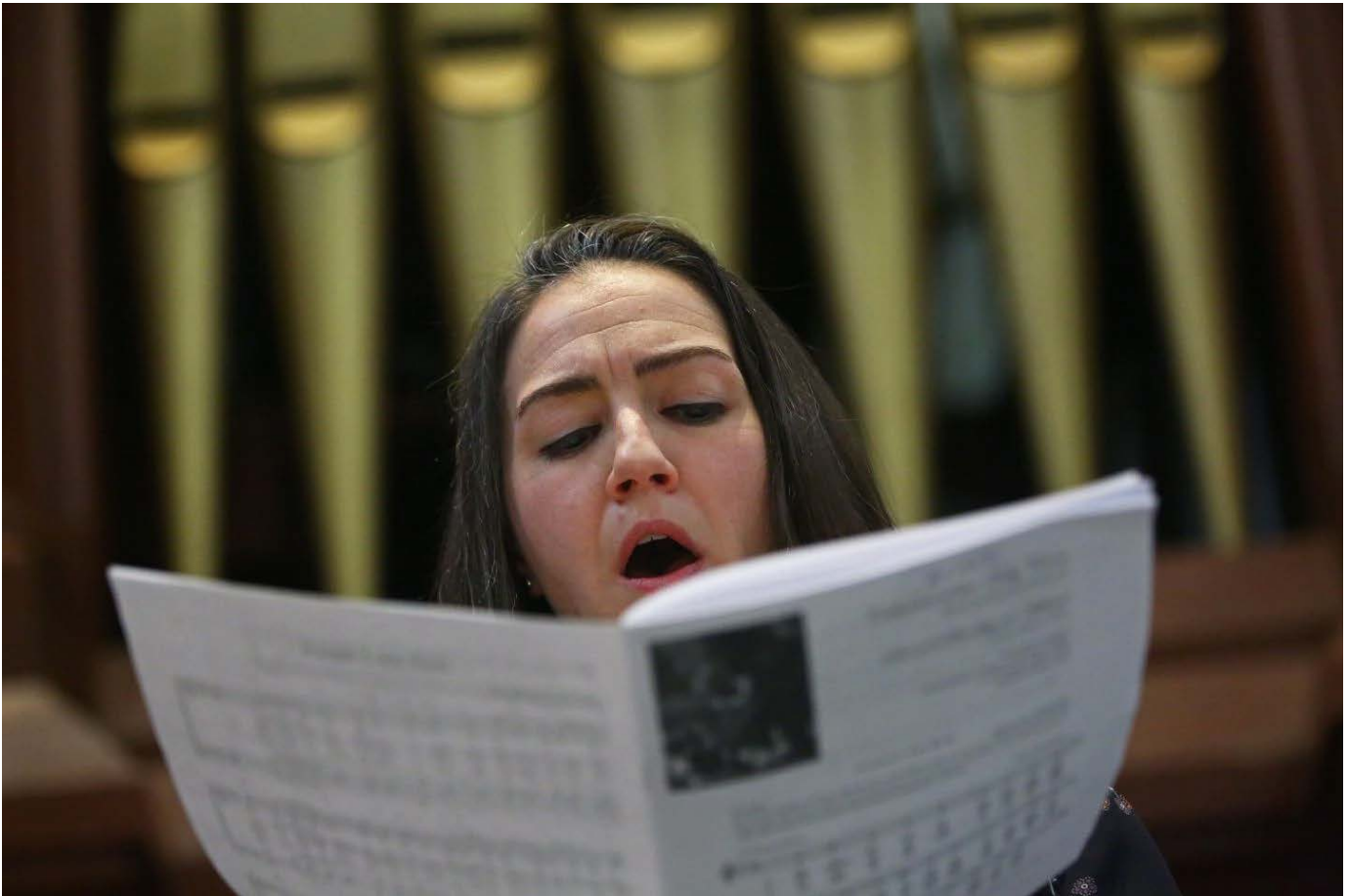


Richard Clark knelt during preparation for Holy Communion with his 7-year-old son, Sean Clark, by his side. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

And, later, the choir talks about the music, its director, and a Christmas season like no other.

“It’s rare to find somebody who really embodies all the things you want or need in a music director,” said Jaime Korkos, a 38-year-old mezzo-soprano from Hopkinton. “Oftentimes, they’re a little too egocentric or they have no patience.

“But Richard happens to be really good at all things. He’s an amazing organist, but he’s also a composer. And the stuff he writes isn’t just your sort of nice basic thing. He really writes interesting music. And it makes it really fun to sing.”



Jaime Korkos had a solo during the 11:30 a.m. Mass. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

That fun — that music — echoed off the walls of the stately, handsome cathedral. The congregation may have been thinned by pandemic worries, but the spirit of Christmas is alive within its pews.

“His talent is bringing the joy of music out of everyone whether you’re an amateur or a professional,” said Michael Gonzalez, 28, of Fall River, who had sung at the cathedral under the previous music director, Leo Abbott, and is now back in the choir loft again.

“He just makes it a pleasure to come in here every week and make beautiful music. And because of that, it’s a no-brainer. Why not come back every week?”



Tenor Michael Gonzalez sported sparkly shoes. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

That’s a good question. And it’s being answered by the choir in song.

A choir whose members know that now, perhaps more than ever, there is a soulful need for the kind of music that Clark coaxes from them every Sunday.

“I tell my relatives and friends that I’m one of the luckiest people in the world

because through the whole pandemic I think there were only three weekends, maybe four, that I didn't sing," Clark said.

"I feel such great joy to be able to bring my own talents in conjunction with other singers to produce the best kind of music we could so people could not feel like the world had stopped. That was the greatest thing.

"Everything stopped and the music for us kept going. It was a constant and it reminded you that we weren't alone. You weren't alone. We're here to help you pray. We're here to help you lift your eyes and your thoughts to God."

All of that comes under the direction of Richard Clark, whose son Sean, a second-grader at Saint Agatha School in Milton, offered this simple assessment of his father's Christmastime music:

"I don't know how to explain what I like about it," said the little boy, smiling shyly. "But I like it."

To which his father's soaring choir would in unison gladly sing this heavenly response: "Amen."

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