



RETURN TO SPIRIT

LE CANTIQUÉ DES CANTIQUES

The voice and sounds of Renaissance choral music presented by Yves Daniel-Lesur resonate in the grand space and halls of iconic St. John's Cathedral as part of the city's Le French May programme

Text Tara Lee

Photos courtesy of Florence Cheng and Barquentine Choral Artists



Barquentine Choral Artists recently performed their debut concert, *Return to Spirit*, at St. John's Cathedral on Garden Road. The first half of the concert showcased four pieces from the Renaissance period, and the latter half paid homage to modern French musician Yves Daniel-Lesur with a performance of his most celebrated work, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*.

Choral music has a long history in European church music. A choir or a chorus refers to a group of singers, and Chorale technically means a Lutheran hymn tune. All these terms derive from the ancient Greek word *Khoros*, an alternative name for Greek goddesses of music, the nine Muses. Choir or chorus can be used interchangeably and sometimes with *Ensemble*, the French word for "together".

A choir's performance as an *Ensemble* is crucial, since it encompasses singers of varied pitches. The most typical structure of a choir comprises soprano, alto, tenor and bass singers.

Soprano, the high female voice, usually sings the melody. Since human ears are calibrated to hear higher pitches more clearly, the audience has a tendency to focus on the soprano singers. Alto is the low female voice, which adds warmth and richness to the harmony.

The high male voice, tenor, is valued for its rarity, while the low male voice, bass, provides the foundation of the sound.

Grander choirs include variations to the four basic categories. Treble is the soprano range voice. Medium range female and male voices are respectively labeled mezzo-soprano and baritone.

Choral music was not always polyphonic, of many vocals. Manuscripts dating back to the twelfth century preserve a large volume of monophonic *chansons*, art songs sung by a solo artist in intricate musico-poetic forms.

Music during the twelfth century, as other aspects of life, was dictated by the Christian fervor of the Middle Ages. *Chansons*

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and professionally composed music remained mostly in the domain of the Catholic church.

With the advent of the Renaissance two centuries later, the ideal life was no longer a monastic escape from society, but full participation in artistic and intellectual pursuits. The subjects of musical content diversified, from glorifying God to celebrating nature and the human essence. Choral music reached its peak during this time. Sheets of verses and songs were written in massive quantities for both the church and secular performances in celebration of Humanism.

Subsequent eras put more emphasis on instruments than a cappella music. During the Baroque era, Opera featured elaborate and stylized vocal performances accompanied by Sinfonietta, a band. Symphony orchestras continued to grow in popularity in the Classical Era, while choral music fell in prominence.

Le Cantique des Cantiques is Daniel-Lesur's effort to return to the Renaissance and renew the appreciation for small-scale, unaccompanied vocals for the delicate emotional power they have.

Yves Daniel-Lesur was a composer, educator and music administrator born in Paris in 1908. His mother, Alice Lesur, was an accomplished composer herself and taught Daniel-Lesur organ and music composition from an early age. He pursued further study in music at the Paris Conservatoire and became a professor at Schola Cantorum in 1935.

In the following year he co-founded *La Jeune France* – The Young France – with his close friends and musicians, Yves Marie Baudrier, André Jolivet and Olivier Messiaen. The four members declared themselves dedicated to “a return to the human”, or the ideology of Humanism from the fourteenth to sixteenth century.

Renaissance tribute society *La Jeune France* allowed a wide range of styles. Its manifesto encouraged the values of



emotional expression and sincerity in music. Their declaration was a purposeful rebellion against the contemporary trend. Other Parisian musicians of the 1930s favoured neo-classicism, the revival of the Classical Era.

The friendship of *La Jeune France* endured through the Second World War and for a lifetime for Daniel-Lesur and Olivier Messiaen. In 1990, Messiaen presented Daniel-Lesur with the award of Grand Officer of the *Légion d'Honneur*. At the ceremony, Messiaen gave a speech where he addressed “the light dreamlike quality” of Daniel-Lesur’s “harmonic language”.

The harmony of *Le Cantique de Cantiques* comprises twelve voices singing seven motets, or complex “movements” of voice parts. The lyric incorporates excerpts from *Song of Songs* from the Bible and ecclesiastical Latin verses.

Song of Songs, also called *Canticle of Canticles* or *Song of Solomon*, is a chapter from the Old Testament. The third section of the biblical canon, it contains a collection of love poems spoken alternatively by a man and a woman. In a religious context, the love between the two speakers symbolizes the relationship between humankind and God or the church and Jesus Christ.

The seventh and final movement of *Le Cantique de Cantiques*, titled “Épithalame”, presents upper voices singing an excerpt from *Song of Songs*: “Press me down as a stamp upon your heart, as a seal on your arm. Because love is strong as Death.”

Simultaneously, the lower voices sing “Veni Sponsa Christi”, “come forth bride of Christ,” in an Ostinato, constant melodic repetition. Writer and musicologist Nigel Simeone compared the rich texture of “Épithalame” to “the joyous pealing of bells” in his obituary of Daniel-Lesur.

Florence Cheng the director of Barquentine Choral Artists, recalled the first time she listened to Daniel-Lesur. She had freshly relocated to San Francisco to begin her study at the state university. She found *Le Cantique de Cantiques* particularly captivating for its fourteenth century style simplicity layered with the dexterity of a contemporary songsmith. “It sounded antique and modern at the same time. The nostalgia in the music captivated my ears.”

Her encounter with the piece lasted through her study in choral conducting and vocal training at San Francisco Conservatory of Music. She coached the state university’s Women’s Chorus and received a scholarship from the Chorus America Conference held in Los Angeles in 2007.

After her return to Hong Kong, Cheng has been serving as an active member of the city’s choral community as the maestro of community and school choirs, as well as the Hong Kong Children’s Choir. Compelled by her desire for further creative independence as a choral conductor, she established the Barquentine Choral Artists in January this year.

For the Artists’ public inauguration, Cheng chose the song that impressed her eight years prior, *Le Cantique de Cantiques*. She titled the show *Return to Spirit* as a reference to the return to Humanism spirit Daniel-Lesur promoted in his lifetime.

Choral music can be daunting, as is often the case with art music, in comparison to more popular genres. Nevertheless, Cheng believes a choir can reach a wide-ranging audience once the listener is acquainted with the emotive power of human voices. “Voice is universal,” she said. “We use voice to speak and to communicate every day. Accompanied music can be more rich or colourful, but choral music can touch people’s hearts more directly.”

