



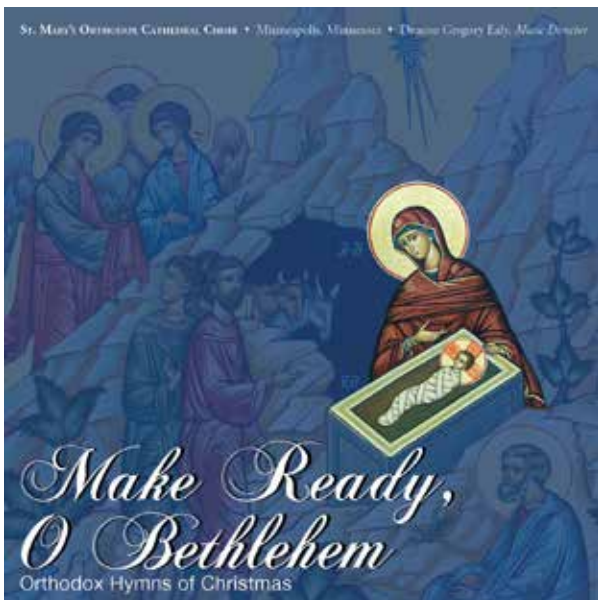
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MAKE READY, O BETHLEHEM: ORTHODOX HYMNS OF CHRISTMAS

St. Mary's Orthodox Cathedral Choir, Minneapolis, MN, USA
Dn. Gregory Ealy, Conductor
2016
<http://stmarysoca.org/choir.html>

In the world of Anglophone Orthodox liturgical music, a dearth of normatively good parish and cathedral choirs means that when an ensemble wants to produce an English-language recording, there really are no English-language models that can serve as the ideal to strive for the way there might be for Greek or Slavic repertoire. As a result there always rather has to be a “concept” – the choir is directed to imagine what a Russian choir would sound like if they were native English speakers singing English repertoire, for example, and the choir approaches it with a particular kind of sound and style that might be recognizable as natively Anglophone. This choir might sing Byzantine chant in English as though they were an early music ensemble singing English choral music but with Mediterranean colouring; some other choir might sing English polyphonic repertoire as though they were a good college choir, well-blended, well-produced, and overall technically clean (if somewhat bland).



St Mary's Orthodox Cathedral Choir in Minneapolis, Minnesota is exceptional in that they are, in fact, a normatively good cathedral choir, and one of remarkable size, for that matter (the liner notes credit *eighty-eight* singers), with a wonderful conductor, the Rev. Dn Gregory Ealy. As represented on their new recording, *Make Ready, O Bethlehem: Orthodox Hymns of Christmas*, the “concept” need be understood as nothing more than an excellent ensemble doing what they normally do with the kind of repertoire they usually sing, although the net result is something akin to what the Robert Shaw Chorale might have sounded like if they had attempted the Orthodox Church in America's English-language adaptations of Obikhod.

Singing a programme that traces the hymnographic trajectory of the Nativity of Christ starting from the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary and going through the Divine Liturgy of Christmas Day, Ealy is masterful in his direction of the large group, with clean cutoffs, ensemble breathing that always sounds together, and a blend that preserves the weight of a group this size while achieving a unity of sound that one would expect from a much smaller ensemble. If their sound

does not have the laser point focus of Cappella Romana, it does not really need to; and if, ultimately, it is not *quite* professional quality – there are tuning issues here and there, and there are some high notes that do not land quite as well as you might think they will – well, there are ostensibly “professional” recordings of English-language Orthodox music that do not sound as good as this, and St Mary’s does not claim professional status. They claim to be nothing but an Orthodox church choir, and with the presence of good singers all around and Dn. Ealy at the helm, they are an exemplar of that for the American landscape.

The repertoire is almost entirely programmed with office hymnody selected from the various traditional chants of the Slavic repertoires; Obikhod, Valaam, Optina, Galician, and so on. While the presence of different styles within the Slavic tradition does make this interesting, the textures all sound similar enough that as a CD programme (as opposed to a service, to be clear) it does not function very well as, say, background music to making Christmas cookies. There is an unrelentingly heavy syllabic quality to the Slavic chant tradition that, to my ear, does not treat the English language with the grace that one comes to expect from the ebb and flow in the choral recitations of, say, Anglican chant. Regardless, this is the expected approach for the repertoire, and again, the choir sings it with authority and mastery. The appearance of paraliturgical carols at the end of the recording is a cheery welcome, however, and a lovely showcase for more modern – if still traditional in approach – compositions by Fr Sergei Glagolev, Richard Toensing, and Maia Aprahamian. Recommended.

Richard Barrett