

# Music review: Thirteen Strings/ Seventeen Voyces Christmas concert



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Kevin Mallon led Thirteen Strings in a spirited performance.

**Thirteen Strings/  
Seventeen Voyces Candelight Christmas concert  
At St. Andrew's Church**

## Reviewed Sunday night

Thirteen Strings and Seventeen Voyces joined up Sunday night for a concert of Christmas music by candlelight. Baroque pieces and carol arrangements were complemented by the premiere a new commission by Kingston-based composer John Burge.

Burge, who teaches in the music department at Queen's, was inspired by the Victorian Catholic poet Gerald Manley Hopkins' *Rosa Mystica*, a meditation on the medieval allegory associating the Virgin Mary with the rose.

Burge's *Rosa Mystica* is extremely accessible, tuneful, transparent and cinematic. It opens with a gently lilting pastorella, then shifts into a series of expressive movements for vocal and instrumental soloists and choir.

There's a lovely setting of the chorale *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming* for girls' choir (the senior vocal ensemble from De La Salle high school – more on them later) that offered a bit of Bach pastiche with its jaunty oboe obbligato. But it's in the sixth movement, with its closer, darker, harmonies, dramatic build and striking word-painting, that the piece achieves its most memorable moments.

Among the four soloists, baritone David Roth was the most consistent. Tenor Bud Roach has the kind of projection and clarity that makes you sit up and take notice, but the vocal colour can take on an unpleasant nasal quality.

The first half of the concert was given over to Purcell and Bach. Conductor Kevin Mallon is a pre-eminent Baroque specialist, and while the orchestra's instruments are modern, the intent and flavour were in high period style, with incisive dotted rhythms, sharply delineated counterpoint, and shapely, chiaroscuro dynamic effects.

In the Bach cantata *Sehet, welch eine liebe*, soprano Maghan McPhee – who is singing with NACO in *Messiah* later this week – was much less in her element than she had been in the Burge. Her tone was too thick and heavy for the Bach, her German diction almost unintelligible. Her tendency to bob her upper body up and down was especially distracting with a score in her hands. The young countertenor Mark Donnelly has an attractive middle and upper register, but the voice loses the alto quality in the lower notes, with too noticeable a break.

Seventeen Voyces seemed to struggle to keep up with Mallon's tempi, and tuning was in issue all evening, especially in the women's voices.

The De La Salle choir had no such difficulties, either in the Burge or the three arrangements of carols by Ottawa-area composers. Director Robert Filion deserves major kudos for his work with these young women, who produced an astonishing sound; pure but powerful, warm, rich, and not at all girlish, with marvellous, exacting intonation and diction. Kelly-Marie Murphy's setting of *The Darkest Midnight* in December was an exquisite highlight.