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Preview: Cantus to open Tuesday Musical's season on September 24 with "A Place For Us"

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by Daniel Hathaway



Cantus, the nine-member male a cappella vocal ensemble from Minnesota's Twin Cities, will open Tuesday Musical's new season on September 24 at E.J. Thomas Hall in Akron with a program entitled "A Place for Us."

Cantus was born at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN when four singers — three of them cellists — found something missing in their musical lives. "In midwestern universities, you usually join a gender choir during your first year then have the opportunity to try out for a school's flagship ensemble," Cantus tenor Aaron Humble told us in a telephone conversation. "The guys that originally got together were missing that gender experience during their second year, so they formed a male voice ensemble that also reflected their

interest in chamber music."

Cantus became a professional ensemble in 2000, eventually shedding its original founders, who moved on to other things. "It took a lot of optimism — and maybe even some naiveté to keep the ensemble going — and singers were cutting pie at Bakers Square before the group could pay a full-time salary." Unlike some other male-voice ensembles, Cantus remained true to its original tenor, baritone and bass configuration. "I often miss the sound of treble voices more than I knew I could," Humble said, "but there's something truly remarkable about the TTBB sound and the way low voices can generate overtones."

Cantus has also remained true to its original concept of an ensemble that has no conductor or artistic director. "We have an elected body of three singers we call the Artistic Council, which provides general leadership. Most decisions are made collaboratively. When we build programs, we start with a theme. Even the office staff gets involved, because if we come up with an unsellable idea, we want them to be honest and forthright about whether or not they can market it and fill a hall."

"A Place For Us" arose out of collective discussions about immigrants and immigration. "Most everybody has come here as a nation of immigrants, something that's real and is still happening," Humble said. "They come

to follow a dream, but in the end, they're searching for a new home."

Once a theme is chosen, the group chooses to arrange its programs into a narrative rather than a chronological playlist. Cantus's program for Akron "may look strange on paper, but it works brilliantly in a performance," Humble says. "For example, we have a Dave Matthews tune following a William Billings piece, something you could be skeptical about but when you experience them in person you don't even realize they span three hundred years!"



Aaron Humble, who grew up in Portage County and went on to study at Millikin and Indiana Universities, is fascinated by early American music, especially that of the Colonial period. That Billings piece, *Lament Over Boston*, memorializes the Boston Massacre in words borrowed from the Book of Jeremiah and the Psalms. "Billings changed the words, so it's 'by the rivers of Watertown' and 'a voice was heard in Roxbury,'" Humble says. That speaks to the American experience and the willingness to brashly and boldly change things for your own purposes. Billings was a leather tanner of whom it was said that he had one good leg, one good arm and one good eye. He had no interest in conforming to European practices."

Cantus's program in Akron will also include two premieres: Sarah Kirkland Snider's *Psalm of the Soil* and Cantus member Paul John Rudoi's *America Will Be!* "Snider and her librettist Nathaniel Bellows crafted *Psalm* with our theme in mind. It's a beautiful way of talking about finding a new home while honoring the past and our ancestors who lie under the very soil. It has wonderful harmonies, some bitonality and low-range, clustery chords that are used really effectively to create color. *America Will Be!* creates a great juxtaposition with John W. Work's *This Ol' Hammer* with its message that the Land of the Free is still not always free for everyone."

Download Cantus's complete September 24th program [here](#). Tuesday Musical's future performances feature The Cleveland Orchestra with Jakub Hrusa and William Preucil on October 18 (a Friday); the string quartet Brooklyn Rider with Béla Fleck, banjo on November 12; pianist Jeremy Denk on February 4 (the annual Margaret Baxtresser piano concert); the chamber orchestra A Far Cry with cellist Matt Haimovitz on March 11; and mezzo-soprano Susan Graham with pianist Brian Zeger on April 10 (a Thursday).

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