



St. Mary and Archangel Michael Coptic Orthodox Church

## Whitney

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the cohesive “umbrella” of Christianity. Faith was the way of life – for everyone. God was a given, not a question mark. This cohesive community belief found its highest expression in the elaborate – and collaborative – construction of the cathedral.

The cathedral itself is a perfect manifestation of interconnectivity and community across time and space – a miraculous convergence of divergent skills, thousands of hours of thousands of lives all working towards one goal – the unity of architecture aimed at something loftier than self. This democracy of labor included master craftsmen-quarrymen; stone cutters; sculptors; mortar makers; masons; carpenters; blacksmiths; roofers; and glassmakers – each running a full workshop on site that depended on a cast of assistants, apprentices, and common laborers. They had to work together and coordinate every part of the construction, practicing the precision of perfect geometry every step of the way. The master mason was continually checking that each stone was perfectly horizontal and level, even as he was using a plumb line to make certain each wall was perfectly vertical. Any mistake in the foundation would endanger the wall that was to be built on top of it. If one stonecutter was off by inches, the entire structure could topple. As remarkable as the skills involved was the patience of generations dedicated to the task at hand.

One of my fondest memories visiting a cathedral occurred when I visited Hereford Cathedral, in England, home to Mappa Mundi – the largest medieval map known to exist, circa 1300 – a perfect manifestation of this cohesive medieval worldview. Drawn on a single sheet of vellum, this circular map includes 420 towns, 15 Biblical events,

33 animals and plants, 32 people, and 5 scenes from classical mythology, with Jerusalem at the center and the Garden of Eden placed on the Eastern most edge at the top of the map, signifying the beginning of the world.

The cohesive medieval viewpoint expressed in Mappa Mundi has its roots in the Coptic Church – the very first Christian church founded on the teachings of St. Mark who brought Christianity to Egypt during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero in the first century.

In 2008, the Coptic Church, of Natick, Massachusetts, purchased St. Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church – built in 1898 by French-Canadian immigrant millworkers and closed by the Catholic Diocese in 2003 – to answer the needs of 200 families in a five-state region as it is the only church of its kind between Nashua and Canada. In 2016, the Coptic Orthodox Church, recognized as one of “the most imposing churches in all of New England,” was granted a New Hampshire Land and Community Heritage Investment grant of \$390,000 towards its restoration.

This imposing space – with its basilica-style vaulted ceilings, a 190-foot high central tower and elaborate gold iconostasis wall sequestering the sanctuary – inspired Symphony NH Executive Director Marc Thayer to propose a concert featuring a menagerie of musical traditions, embracing unity in community through the unity of music. The concert is made possible through the support of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, the Samuel T. Hunt Foundation, Symphony NH musicians and community performers.

The concert will feature four of Symphony NH’s most experienced musicians who also claim divergent backgrounds – Greek violist Kathleen Kalogeras; Armenian violinist Sargis Karapetyan; Austrian Katherina Radberger; and Georgian

cellist Alexander Badalov. Diya Ganesh will perform alongside her brother Darshan Ganesh, playing the mridangam, ancient South Indian hand drums. Paul Lizotte, Rivier University English professor and an accomplished Boston-area fiddler, will perform French Canadian music.

The unity of music lies in abstraction. As it transcends language and nationality, music dwells outside the realm of translation, touching emotion and spirit, bypassing the rational mind.

We so often look past architecture. Goethe said the best architecture is “silent music.” The unique menagerie of archways, vaults and chambers in a cathedral such as St. Mary and Archangel Michael offers a particularly sublime venue for music. As different “voices” – different musical instruments – interact antiphonally with each other and the space itself, they produce a dazzling auditory experience, not unlike watching sunlight streaming a variegated spectrum of color through stained glass windows.

Both architecture and music are spatial experiences – in terms of movement and time. We move through space in architecture, one step at a time – just as we move through time one measure at a time in music. We cannot walk through more than one space at a time just as we cannot listen to more than one musical note at a time. In a concert, we enter into the temporal “room” of music. Both architecture and music force us to “be” in the present, to interact with our surroundings by allowing space and time to unfold at its own pace.

Nashua’s only cathedral is a rarity. It is a rare opportunity for everyone and anyone in Nashua to witness a multi-cultural concert in this rarefied space. Come and here it sing!

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