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'Cool' Christmas Concert Gets Planetarium Lift Off

By Ross Amico
Nov 30, 2022

With the inauguration of the **James Webb Space Telescope** and the launch of **Artemis I**, **NASA** is back on top of the news cycle. Images of the Earth from space recall the wonder experienced by the astronauts of **Apollo 8**, 54 years ago. The Christmas Eve mission was the first to send humans to orbit the moon and return safely to Earth.



The iconic "Earthrise" image taken by astronaut Bill Anders on Apollo 8 on Christmas Eve 1968. Friday marked the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 8 liftoff.

"**Earthrise**," a photograph taken from the capsule by **William Anders** during lunar orbit, is one of the most iconic ever taken.

"The Consolation of Apollo," **Kile Smith**'s 35-minute choral work, features the actual words of the Apollo 8 astronauts framed by selections from "The Consolation of Philosophy," writings by the 6th-century philosopher Boethius. The juxtaposition of Apollo, mythical charioteer of the sun, with Apollo 8, the manmade spacecraft bearing his name — each traversing the skies of their respective eras — can't help but inspire a kind of awed reflection on what humanity is capable of achieving.

Smith's piece will receive a unique performance in a concert by the LOTUS Project to be presented at the Planetarium at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton on Saturday, December 3.

Choral director **Alicia Brozovich** first encountered "The Consolation of Apollo" during her studies at Westminster Choir College. "One of the movements was in our repertory list," she says. "It's not your traditional classical choral music. When people think choir, they might think it's happening in a church or that it's something with orchestra, like Beethoven's 9th Symphony. I decided I wanted to do this in a planetarium. I thought it would be a really cool, nontraditional holiday concert — to be in a planetarium, considering being in the stars. It's really in the spirit of what the holidays are supposed to do: draw people's minds to something bigger than themselves."

The piece culminates in a setting of the first 10 verses of the King James translation of the Book of Genesis, which astronauts Anders, Jim Lovell, and Frank Boorman read live during the Christmas Eve transmission as their spacecraft orbited the moon and viewers saw a grainy, black-and-white image of the Earth rising over the lunar surface. The astronauts concluded by wishing everyone a Merry Christmas. "God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth," Boorman said.

The subject was suggested to composer Smith by Donald Nally, conductor of the Philadelphia-based, Grammy Award-winning choir The Crossing, as the most uplifting topic he could think of. Smith had already produced several successful works for the group, including a highly praised setting of the "Vespers," recorded on Navona Records in collaboration with the Philadelphia-based Renaissance band Piffaro.

The composer immediately fell in love with the text, which features overlapping dialogue between the astronauts, with interpolations from mission control and behind-the-scenes technical direction.

He was especially intrigued by the dissonance he perceived between classical mythology, suggested by the name of the spacecraft — Apollo, who guided the sun across the stars — and the reading of the astronauts of the Biblical creation text, as the first men ever to look down on the Earth from the vantage of space.



"The Consolation of Apollo" composer Kile Smith.

"It was really wild when I started thinking about it," Smith says, "because actually what they're doing is they're blasting past mythology. They're bringing God into it, and yet we have Apollo, so you have the God of the Bible and the Apollo of Roman myth. The more I thought about it, Boethius just came to me."

Boethius' "The Consolation of Philosophy" became one of the most influential writings of the Middle Ages.

"He was an amazing person, because he really combined classical thought with Christian theology," Smith says, "although 'The Consolation of Philosophy' is really just a work of philosophy. Good and evil, the Wheel of Fortune, life is unfair, good things happen to bad people, bad things happen to good people — he addresses all of this.

"It occurred to me that there might be something in Boethius that addresses this dissonance, that philosophically addresses our position on Earth, our position in the universe, even our position in perhaps a lonely universe, looking at the Earth, our position as even having power to be able to fly into the sky and to do amazing things and to fly beyond ourselves."

It was also Nally's idea to supplement the transcript of the Apollo 8 telecast with classic and romantic poems about Apollo, to which the composer added. The work is scored for mixed choir, crotales (tuned cymbals), and bass drum.

With around 60 performances to date (including one in at the UTA Planetarium of University of Texas at Arlington in 2018), Smith says that it is his most popular work. "Consolation" has been flitting around the area for some time now. The piece received its premiere at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 2014.

It has also been in circulation around Westminster Choir College, where Nally earned his master's degree in choral conducting in 1987. By coincidence, Nally is a visiting artist at Westminster this semester. The Crossing has been nominated nine times for the Grammy Award in the Best Choral Performance category, winning in 2018 and 2019. One of the nominations was for a recording of Smith's "Arc in the Sky."

Smith, who makes his home in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania, is the retired curator of the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, housed at the central branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia, where he served for 30 years. He is not only a composer, but a perceptive and entertaining writer. He supplies articles as contributing editor for Philadelphia's Broad Street Review, delivers lectures, writes CD reviews, and maintains a blog.

He has also had decades of experience as a broadcaster. His podcast, "Fleisher Discoveries," explores recordings of unusual music from the vast holdings of the library. The program is now in its 20th year. It began as "Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection," on Philadelphia's classical and jazz station, WRTI, in 2002. In 2018, it made the transition to podcast.

Smith's interest in nature photography proves that his visual sense is as well-honed as his ears. Samples of his many talents and his busy concert schedule are posted for your perusal at his website, www.kilesmith.com.

Like Nally, Brozovich received her master's in choral conducting from Westminster, in 2017. She conducts the Westminster Chapel Choir and the Westminster Community Chorus. She is also assistant conductor of the Urban Playground Chamber Orchestra in New York City.



Alicia Brozovich and the LOTUS Project, above, perform 'The Consolation of Apollo' by Kile Smith on December 3.

In Pennington, she directs the adult choir at St. James Roman Catholic Church. She is also a member of the Theoria Chamber Choir, an ensemble that specializes in performing Slavic choral music. The choir serves as the primary liturgical choir at Assumption of the Virgin Mary Byzantine Ruthenian Catholic Church in Trenton.

In addition, she has held positions with Trenton Children's Chorus and the New Jersey Capital Philharmonic Orchestra.

As a professional soprano, she sings solo engagements and performs with the Philadelphia Symphonic Choir. Most recently, she joined the New York Philharmonic Chorus and has been assisting Jacobs Music as a community engagement coordinator. She introduced the LOTUS Project in January of this year.

Brozovich says this weekend's event is a true collaboration with the New Jersey State Museum. She is especially grateful to Margaret O'Reilly, the museum's executive director, who offered to cosponsor the concert, and her staff, who have been preparing the visual effects.

Saturday will not be the first time Brozovich has reached for the stars. In 2019 she led the Westminster Community Chorus in a multi-media concert that included Ola Gjeilo's "Sunrise Mass," in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission. That concert featured projections and transmissions from the first moon landing.

"I do have a personal interest in astronomy," she admits. "If I were a scientist, I would be an astronomer, and I had the desire to be an astronaut when I was five."

Brozovich, who hails from Conway Springs, Kansas, notes, "The Kansas state motto is 'To the stars through difficulties,' so I've just always had a little affinity for the miracle of the skies."

Now a Trenton resident, she also understands the transformative potential of the arts. She has a larger vision of presenting "a multidimensional, interdisciplinary arts festival that's connective and cohesive in Trenton."

"We really want to get into a habit of performing in spaces that people wouldn't ordinarily associate with attending a concert, especially in a city like Trenton," she says. To demonstrate "the different ways you can use these spaces is really important to revitalization."

She is currently seeking a venue in which to perform contemporary British composer Joby Talbot's "Path of Miracles," with an art installation, in the spring.

Making the community and the world a better place is central to the mission of the LOTUS Project, which, this past July, in collaboration with the New Jersey Capital Philharmonic Orchestra, raised $12,000 for an orphanage in Ukraine.

"We are choral music artists, who are passionate about what we do, and the difference it can make in a community. Our vision is a little bigger than just putting on concerts," she says.

Consolation of Apollo, the LOTUS Project, New Jersey State Museum Planetarium, 205 West State Street, Trenton. Saturday, December 3, 7 p.m. Free will donation ($25 suggested). Register. www.thelotusprojectnj.org.

More information on Alicia Brozovich: www.alicianbrozovich.com.

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