

It takes a lot to best the Mormon Tabernacle **Choir** at Christmastime.

Not to mention youthful Italian opera sensations Il Volo and Placido Domingo.

But the **Notre Dame Children's Choir** and composer J.J. Wright held them -- and opera star Joyce DiDonato -- out of the top spot on Billboard's Traditional Classical Albums charts for Nov. 26 and Dec. 3 with the Advent record "**O Emmanuel**."

In fact, "**O Emmanuel**" debuted at No. 1 on the chart, unseating Il Volo's "Notte Magica: A Tribute to Three Tenors" collaboration with Domingo.

"We're riding high at the moment. We're very excited," ND **Children's Choir** conductor and artistic director Mark **Doerries** says. "It's in some ways unexpected, but we're pleased that this music speaks to a lot of people. We're hoping to keep showing up on Billboard for the rest of the holiday season."

On the chart to be released Saturday, the album does drop to No. 4, replaced by "Notte Magica" at No. 1, but for a first release by a small publishing, Dynamic Catholic, its first three weeks on the charts indicate it can hold its own against major label releases and established stars.

Grammy Award-winning producer Thomas Moore and Grammy-winning engineer Robert Friedrich recorded the album at the University of **Notre Dame's** DeBartolo Performing Arts Center, with the ND **Children's Choir** and pianist-composer Wright, as well as four adult vocal soloists, musicians from the Fifth House Ensemble and Wright's own jazz trio.

Commissioned by the ND **Children's Choir**, "**O Emmanuel**" is a setting of the "O Antiphons" liturgical texts, for the last week of Advent. The work ends with the arrival of Christmas.

Wright pulls off quite a feat in combining genres including traditional chant, gospel, avant-garde classical, pop and improvised jazz without a single incongruous transition. **Doerries** says that the genres morph and overlap with such seamless flow that what emerges is essentially a new genre altogether.

"J.J. and I are both heavily influenced by modernist and experimental composers, and we wanted to go beyond where classical music usually goes," **Doerries** says.

He points to a section called "When the Sun Rises in the Morning Sky" as an example of the challenging music the children undertake in the piece.

"There, the kids sing aleatorically -- they have a melody to sing, but they get to choose when to sing it. As they come in at those various points, it begins to create this large cloud of sound," **Doerries** says. "He allows the soloists and the children to have their own creativity, shaping the music according to how they feel."

The jazz trio provides improvised interludes and even the wind and string players from the Chicago-based Fifth House Ensemble get to play certain passages at their own discretion. These freedoms ensure that every performance of the piece will blossom with different and unique details.

Wright studied under Carmen-Helena Téllez in **Notre Dame's** Sacred Music program, and he and his family are currently in the midst of a year in Italy while he studies at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Rome. In an email Q&A with The Tribune, Wright explains that the short introductory piece, "Gabriel's Message," gives hints of what's to come.

"I wanted a way to give the listener more context to the journey that happens as they progress through the Antiphons," he says. "'**O Emmanuel**' ends with the birth of Christ, and all the angels singing 'Glory to God in the Highest.' I thought the Annunciation, where the Angel Gabriel asks Mary to be the mother of Jesus, would

be a great start. It lets us know where we're going."

Pleased with the chart success of the album, Wright would like to see "O Emmanuel" catch on in the repertoires of all kinds of other ensembles.

"I hope it can be performed all over the place and I'm doing what I can to create versions that are accessible to many different types of groups," he says. "Ultimately, my hope is that people come to love the music and that it brings deeper joy, peace and compassion into their lives."

On CD

J.J. Wright's "O Emmanuel," featuring the **Notre Dame Children's Choir**, vocal soloists, Fifth House Ensemble and the J.J. Wright Trio, is available on CD and download through dynamiccatholic.com or oemmanuel.com for \$14.95 for the CD and \$17.95 for the CD with digital downloads.

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