

## A liberating holiday performance

By Keith Powers, Correspondent

Posted Dec 1, 2017 at 3:01 AM

It's the blend, says Patrick Swanson, "the interesting mix of high art and low art. The Revels is always doing that — a sophisticated piece, and then some street theater. We keep entertaining both 8-year-olds and 80-year-olds in the same show."

Swanson, who has been artistic director at the Revels for 31 years, is talking about this year's Christmas Revels, "A Venetian Celebration of the Winter Solstice," which opens Dec. 8 at Sanders Theatre. But he could be talking about Revels from any year — even though the themes are changed, and the styles and cultural origins of the performances shift.

"It's this underground river of tradition," he says. "Mysterious things, dying off and coming back to life at this time of year. It's always layered with different ways of celebrating."

The holidays offer many performance alternatives for remembering the season. Most music organizations sing a "Messiah," Handel's great oratorio. Most dance companies stage a "Nutcracker," and revisit Tchaikovsky's brilliant score.

The Revels company also performs the same show annually — except it's different.

"Different than the 'Nutcracker,' or other Christmas spectacles, in that we have a compass of a lot of wonderful stuff that is fed into the archives of Revels," Swanson says. "When it started in was Eurocentric, really Anglo-centric. Then it spread to America, and Appalachia. We've gone to the Balkans, and Georgia, and Armenia.

"I like to put the emphasis on world theater," he says. "We look at the shortest day in the year, a really important time to the northern parts of the world. We have even gone down to Mexico, but there the whole idea of the year dying is literal — the Day of the Dead. And you have kids eating candy sugar skulls.

"What happens in Revels is that you have this kind of assonance," he says. "We create context, by putting things together. And we get people involved. We intentionally mix amateurs and professionals, so that we have some very beautiful singers, making gorgeous music, and a chorus that makes everyone feel like 'I could do that.'"

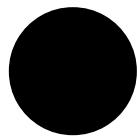
This year's Venetian show is a prime example. The premise — the show's subtitle is "Who Let the Doge Out?" — runs like this: the Doge (lord) of Venice has decided to mix with the commoners, and find out who makes the best Bolognese. Along the way he has adventures he wouldn't normally encounter in his palace: itinerant musicians and actors, convicts, dancers and other assorted entertainers.

Megan Henderson serves as music director, and David Coffin, a familiar face in Revels, leads onstage. The more than 100 players include the Serenissima Dancers, Commedia Buffo, the Pinewoods Morris Men, the Cambridge Symphonic Brass Ensemble, and many musicians from Boston's rich early music community. Richard Snee headlines as the Doge.

"If you take people into a theater at the right time of the year," Swanson says, "in a darkened room with a big brass band, and enjoyable tunes to sing — well, they want to be part of that. It's a liberating sort of gift, to participate. Even when people don't want to at first, they do it in spite of themselves."

*"Christmas Revels 2017: A Venetian Celebration of Winter Solstice" opens on Dec. 8 at Cambridge's Sanders Theatre. For tickets and information visit [www.revels.org](http://www.revels.org) or call 617-496-2222.*

*Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to [keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com](mailto:keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com).*



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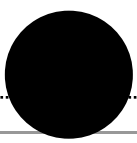
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