

Remembrances of October Festival Choir 2009

The day of the concert was pure October - leaves beginning to turn, skies clear blue, and just a little nip in the air: a foretaste of the coming fall. This would be the 8th annual concert that had started as the finale of the series of concert/recitals called the *Year of the Organ* that had celebrated the installation of the Holtkamp organ in Mt. Auburn's beautiful and historic sanctuary. Eight years prior, the event had hosted guest conductor and world famous organist Phillip Brunelle from the twin cities in Minnesota. As we did then, this October we assembled a "Festival Chorus " from choirs all around the Tri-State; from churches to secular singing societies. And also, like this first event, I had prepared the choir so a guest conductor could come in, and in two rehearsals or so over a weekend "wrap up the package and make it purty".

This year our guest conductor was Dr. Betsy Burleigh. I had met Betsy nearly 15 years prior at a summer conference in Youngstown for the American Choral Director's Association's Ohio chapter. I remember, after a day of workshops and music review/reading sessions, there was a time in the evening for *Gemutlichkeit*, i.e. informal exchanges of ideas, opinions and dreams over beer. After that first meeting, I knew that she was the genuine article – real musician/true human being; full of wit and compassion with wry smile and a twinkle in her big blue eyes. Little did I know that a few years later I'd be one of ten conductors in a week long intense study with Robert Page (then assistant conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony and conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Chorus) that was held at Cleveland State and hosted by Betsy Burleigh and the music faculty there. In that week we renewed our acquaintance and that's how she came to lead the choir just a few weeks ago. (Let me say that Betsy remembers this sequence of events differently; but the point is that a connection was made).

Conductors like Betsy are rare – she hears and immediately adjusts; knowing not only what the problem is, but applying solutions to remedy the problem at hand. She has the gift of positive reinforcement from the podium and also the knowledge and zeal to bring all singers not just to the music, but to musicality which is more like finding the truth and essence of something by refining its smallest parts. Betsy allowed us to soar and achieve her level of understanding, showing us the importance of word rhythms, phrasing, and the utter joy that comes from ensemble singing. Her love and understanding of Haydn in turn gave us a deeper understanding and commitment to a composer whose music was alive and breathing.

Speaking of the music, the program opened with a rousing rendition of a hymn from the shaped-note tradition arranged by Alice Parker, *Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal* followed by a new work by Rick Sowash, dedicated to John Tallmadge called *The Endless Tapestry*. It was a privilege to program this piece. I recall going to Rick's house last year when the piece was in its nascent phase and having him proclaim that his was "my finest effort to date in the choral genre!" It was great to see other people's reaction in rehearsal and performance of this new work and I felt personal pride in having such a wonderful composer as a friend. The featured work on the program was one of the last six masses by Haydn, known as the *Theresa Mass*. There is much speculation as to why Haydn stopped his symphonic output to write six masses, but all agree that these pieces are symphonic in architecture and design and are among his greatest achievements. The grace, arch, scope, chromaticism and setting of the *Theresa*

Mass showed a composer at the height of his creativity and power. It was scored for a string orchestra which I re-arranged for piano, organ, string bass and winds. It featured, prominently, a fabulous quartet of CCM rising stars, including our own Haley Sicking. Betsy was flawless and unflappable in her direction, leading the singers to what many have recalled to me as an out-of-body moment of timeless ecstasy. Not what folks usually say about old Papa Haydn!

Back to the concert, the church was nearly at capacity and just after the last note erupted into a spontaneous standing ovation. All that being said, an event like the OFC isn't just about the music. Indeed, planning for the concert began a year before (I'd actually contacted Betsy 6 years ago). There was a lovely reception that couldn't have happened without lots of folks; the point people being Adrienne and Cate. I think the new floor in the social Hall had just been installed a few days before. Thanks to all who had a hand in every part of the planning and preparation, especially angels Beth Troendly (who accompanied every choral rehearsal) and coordinator supreme Betty Porter, who possesses among other talents the gift of dotting "i's" and crossing "t's".

Let me close with a note from Betsy:

Hi Chris, Beth & Betty

I'm still glowing from the wonderful weekend of music we shared, and just wanted to say a big thank you for inviting me to be a part of your wonderful festival! Chris, you did a superb job preparing the chorus-- but I know it takes so much more than choral prep to put together such a great festival. So here's a big thanks to you and your 'team' for all the little things so needed to make events like this a success-- coming up w/ parts and a workable orchestration, hiring the players, finding & rehearsing soloists, publicizing, websites, setting up the reception, etc.. etc. Betty, thanks for a delightful dinner-- I so enjoyed your home, your husband, your cooking and your guests-- what a lovely evening! And thanks, too, for all the arrangements to make my stay so comfortable. Beth, thanks for providing the e-mail conduit (!-- behind every great man. . .) and for being such a terrific accompanist-- you made my job so easy!

You've got a magical thing going, it was a privilege to be a part of the event! If you are in contact w/ the singers, please pass on my congratulations and gratitude!

Love to you all,

Betsy