

# Voices of Hope

Last spring, as coronavirus positivity rates dipped in the U.S. and COVID-19 vaccines became widely available, orchestras' fall season announcements included a hopeful sign: programs featuring orchestra and chorus. The powerful sound of massed voices and orchestra has been sorely missed for more than a year, but with worries about the health risks of singing and with uncertainty over Delta and other new variants, presenting Beethoven's Ninth or Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony can be a tricky balancing act.

By Brian Wise

Signs of normalcy, or at least what passes for it in 2021, could be found among several symphonic choruses this summer. The Milwaukee Symphony had more than 50 applicants at its chorus auditions, a 60 percent increase over recent, pre-Covid-19 years. Marin Alsop conducted the Handel and Haydn Society in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony on August 27 and more than 10,000 listeners flocked to Boston's DCR Hatch Memorial Shell, among H+H's largest ever turnouts.

On Labor Day weekend, Yannick Nézet-Séguin led the Metropolitan Opera's orchestra and chorus in two performances of Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony, marking the end of an 18-month pandemic-induced silence and the ratification of a new collective bargaining agreement with the musicians. A week later, Nézet-Séguin and the Met orchestra and chorus gave a performance of Verdi's

Requiem on the 20th anniversary of 9/11.

The 2021-22 season arrived in September with a growing slate of orchestras and choruses reporting vaccination requirements for singers, masks in rehearsals, and sometimes creative staging plans: the Met and the Grant Park

Orchestra schedules are dotted with Beethoven's Ninth, Handel's *Messiah*, and Mozart's Requiem. Several orchestras are marshaling choruses for operas or works on themes of inclusion and racial healing.

Orchestra and Chorus in Chicago have each held concerts in which choristers were stationed in front of the orchestra, allowing airflow to be directed away from the instrumentalists on stage. But the

coronavirus is not the manageable issue that orchestras and choruses hoped it would be when most season calendars were planned—not as the threat of the Delta variant looms over rehearsals and concerts.

"For us to welcome back our singers is just momentous," says James Burton, the Boston Symphony Orchestra's choral director and conductor of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, which is slated to return in a series of holiday concerts with the Boston Pops in December. He adds, however, "There is a great sense of anticipation, obviously tempered with where we are in the cycle of the pandemic and coping with the day-to-day realities of planning and protocols. I think the excitement is tempered a little bit."

If the past 18 months have put a halt to most group singing, the 2021-22 season is shaping up as a cautious comeback year for the art form. From coast to coast,



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celebrate kind of resuming public performance," says **Charles Calmer**, the Oregon Symphony's vice president for artistic planning.

orchestra schedules are dotted with performances of Beethoven's Ninth, Handel's *Messiah*, and Mozart's Requiem. A handful of orchestras are marshaling choruses for opera productions or pieces on topical themes of inclusion and racial healing. Of particular note is Joel Thompson's 2016 orchestral/choral work *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, which sets the final words of unarmed Black men killed in encounters with the police and is expected to receive performances this season by the Minnesota Orchestra and the American Composers Orchestra, both in May 2022.

Yet emblematic of an uncertain peri-

od, some ensembles have already put the brakes on their choral plans. As COVID cases spiked in Virginia this summer, the Alexandria Symphony Orchestra replaced its season-opening October performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the composer's Fifth Symphony. Orchestra officials cited the difficulty of finding a sufficiently large rehearsal space and enough singers to perform. The Madison Symphony Orchestra in Wisconsin similarly scrapped its opening performances of Beethoven's Ninth, on account of local COVID restrictions that prohibit singing or playing wind instruments without a mask.

Recent history haunts the choral field: In March 2020, a two-hour choir rehearsal in Washington State turned into a "super-spreader" event, infecting 53 people. Two later died. Artistic planners at several orchestras say they are quietly preparing backup pieces.

#### Gauging Plans to Return

Despite these hurdles, a majority of U.S. choruses are pressing forward, according to preliminary results of an August 2021 survey by Chorus Connection, a U.S.-based company that provides chorus management software. Some 78 percent of the 550 choruses that responded to an

online questionnaire said they plan to give concerts this fall, and another 11 percent said they will make music "in some form," though not before live audiences.

At the Oregon Symphony, incoming Music Director David Danzmayr is scheduled to lead three performances of Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony in October with the Oregon Repertory Singers and the Portland State Chamber Choir. "We decided to go for it," says Charles Calmer, the orchestra's vice president for artistic planning. Performing this work "had obviously a great symbolic significance and it was a good way to celebrate



"Everybody just wants to know, 'How can I check off the boxes and know that I'll be 100 percent okay?' That's just not the

situation that we're in right now," says **Liza Beth**, vice president of membership and communications at Chorus America.



In a pre-pandemic photo, Carlos Kalmar conducts the Oregon Symphony and the Portland Symphonic Choir, University of Puget Sound Adelphian Concert Choir, and vocalists Amber Wagner, Dana Beth Miller, Dimitri Pittas, and Raymond Aceto. David Danzmayr, the orchestra's new music director, is scheduled to lead three performances of Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony in October with the Oregon Repertory Singers and the Portland State Chamber Choir.



kind of resuming public performance. We certainly had internal conversations about whether this was a good idea. We're taking every precaution we possibly can." Faced with a fall surge in cases among unvaccinated Oregonians, the orchestra will mandate a proof of vaccination for performers and require all but the wind and brass players to wear masks.

Elsewhere, a number of symphonic choruses are delaying the reintroduction of choral works until 2022. The Nashville Symphony moved its annual performance of Handel's *Messiah* from its customary December slot to April, when it will be offered complete, as an Easter oratorio. But because *Messiah* employs relatively modest forces (Handel is believed to have used fewer than 30 singers at its premiere), the holiday favorite can be done on the miniature.

"In general, I think our field wants to go above and beyond" when it comes to health and safety measures, says Liza

Beth, vice president of membership and communications at Chorus America, the advocacy, research, and leadership-development organization that advances the choral field. "Our field feels a real responsibility so that this is something that can be part of people's lives again." Beth says that the return of large choral works is motivated by a desire among arts organizations to present "big, transformative audience experiences" that only massed voices can deliver. And choral groups, whether volunteer or professional, can provide community bonding experiences in polarized and contentious times. Still, there are few absolutes when it comes safety protocols.

"Everybody just wants to know, 'How can I check off the boxes and know that I'll be 100 percent okay?'" That's just not the situation that we're in right now," says Beth, whose organization has hosted several online panels with doctors addressing how to perform safely in a public setting.

"It will be a risk-assessment exercise." Chorus America recommends that all of its eligible members be vaccinated, "because we feel that that is the best way to keep our field safe and to keep our field strong and growing," says Beth.

According to the Chorus Connection survey, some 72 percent of ensembles will require vaccination proof for participation this fall. Though compliancy has been widespread, say choral directors, there have been instances of resistance. The San Francisco Symphony's longtime choral director, Ragnar Bohlin, resigned in August because of vaccine mandates instituted by both the company and the city of San Francisco. Bohlin had been an outspoken opponent to COVID vaccines on his Facebook page. But the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission states that employers are allowed to mandate vaccines as a means of protecting the safety and well-being of their workforces.

Masks may be a trickier proposition.



In August, the Handel and Haydn Society performed Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 to a crowd of 10,000 people at Boston's DCR Hatch Memorial Shell. Led by Marin Alsop, H+H performed former U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith's new version of "Ode to Joy." The H+H Orchestra and Chorus were joined by soprano Susanna Phillips, mezzo-soprano Taylor Raven, tenor Issachah Savage, bass-baritone Dashon Burton, and members of H+H's Youth Choruses.



This season, Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic will present a semi-staged Beethoven *Fidelio*, to be performed by actors from the Deaf West Theatre (left) and sung by hearing performers, including the Los Angeles Master Chorale (right).





The Tanglewood Festival Chorus performs at Tanglewood's Ozawa Hall, led by James Burton, the Boston Symphony Orchestra's choral director, August 28, 2019. After a year-plus hiatus, the chorus will perform in two Boston Symphony Orchestra programs this season.



The Boston Children's Chorus is scheduled to perform in Britten's *War Requiem* this season with the Tanglewood Festival Chorus and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.



The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and Chorus perform Verdi's *Requiem* in May 2016 at the Marcus Center, the orchestra's former home. Asher Fisch conducted the performance, which featured soprano Amber Wagner, mezzo-soprano Stefanie Irányi, tenor Garrett Sorenson, and bass Morris Robinson.



Music Director Ken-David Masur and the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, shown in 2018, will perform with the Milwaukee Symphony Chorus this season in a new semi-staging of Grieg's *Peer Gynt*. Masur says that given the many challenges, "We felt that, if it's safe, we can still create very good and memorable experiences for all the people who want to sing."



Musica Sacra and Musica Sacra Orchestra perform at Carnegie Hall, led by Kent Tritle, before the pandemic. This December, Tritle will return to Carnegie to lead lead Musica Sacra and the Oratorio Society in separate, abridged *Messiah* performances; numerous orchestras have announced *Messiah* performances in their own cities.



Soloists Ruby Hughes and Sasha Cooke perform with the Minnesota Orchestra and Minnesota Chorale in Mahler's Symphony No. 2, led by Music Director Osmo Vänskä, June 2017.

About 54 percent of respondents to the Chorus Connection survey said that they will perform with masks this fall, with some using singer-focused mask brands like VocalEase and Resonance. These are built with breathable, acoustically transparent materials while sitting away from the face, with spandex seals that flex with the jaw and chin. Among the groups using masks is the Milwaukee Symphony Chorus, whose home at the renovated Bradley Symphony Center is equipped with a newly installed HVAC system called Plasma Air that is intended to scrub the air of viral particles. "Maybe it would have been easier to say, 'Well, let's just skip this year,'" says the orchestra's music director, Ken-David Masur. "We know that some have done that. But we also felt that, if it's safe, we can still create very good and memorable experiences for all the people who want to sing."

### Voices of Relevance and Inclusion

Among the highlights of Milwaukee's choral-rich season is a semi-staged adaptation of Grieg's music for Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which Masur believes can channel the current zeitgeist. "Peer is this restless boy who wants to feel that there are no consequences in life and that he can just go out and party and explore the world," says Masur, who previously led the production



Sing Harlem Choir



Harlem Chamber Players



Sing Harlem Choir (top left) and Harlem Chamber Players (top right) will be among the performers in American Composers Orchestra's world premiere of *The Gathering* in May 2022 at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. The work, featuring music by (left to right) Carlos Simon, Courtney Bryan, Joel Thompson, and others, is co-curated with National Black Theatre.

by director Bill Barclay with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 2017. "Similarly, we have this escapist mentality, especially now that we are cooped up."

Elsewhere, Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic in April will present a semi-staged production of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, to be performed by actors from the Deaf West Theatre and sung by hearing performers, including the Los Angeles Master Chorale. "Even though, in some ways, it's very traditional repertoire that we are singing in the spring, it's all music that explores these themes of bursting forth and liberation and literally breathing," says Los Angeles Master Chorale Artistic Director Grant Gershon. He cites the Prisoner's Chorus in *Fidelio*, in which the prisoners emerge from their dungeon and sing, "O welche Lust, in freier Luft" (Oh what joy, in the open air / Freely to breathe again!). The LA Phil's spring season will also include Mozart's Mass in C minor and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Gershon notes that "as somebody who believes so strongly in the power of choral music to bring people together, and model a utopian vision for how the world can function," he found it deeply troubling that a chorus can be "the very thing that can harm us. That strange dichotomy

has been the most challenging thing for all choruses."

The Tanglewood Festival Chorus's Burton is looking forward to spring performances of Britten's *War Requiem* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. "I know we haven't been fighting a war," he says. "But it's been a war of sorts. Given this sense of extreme expression which is demanded of the performers, I wonder if our singers will feel that they finally got an outlet for expressing some of the inevitable frustrations of the last year-and-a-half." The full reunion of the orchestra and Tanglewood Festival Chorus will take place in February in Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass*, which Burton calls "a flagship moment where the armada sails into harbor with all guns blazing." The Britten performance also will include singers from the Boston Symphony Children's Choir; safety protocols for those performers had not been finalized at press time.

The American Composers Orchestra, based in New York City, is speaking to the current moment with *The Gathering*, a May concert at Harlem's Apollo Theater co-curated with National Black Theatre. The production is a modern spin on a "ring shout," an ecstatic blend of call-and-response singing, stomping, and clapping, which is rooted in rituals practiced by

enslaved Africans. Joel Thompson's *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* will be presented on the program, alongside Carlos Simon's *Amen!*, Courtney Bryan's *Sanctum*, and other pieces addressing issues of racial strife and social justice. "Rather than reenacting a ring shout, which would be a very specific kind of thing, we decided to try to evoke the spirit of the ring shout and bring it to contemporary context," says ACO Artistic Director Derek Bermel. Singers from Black churches and choral ensembles will participate, "allowing for a space for a community to grieve."

For some conductors, choral masterworks can function as a break from the daily news churn. "I don't try to take something that is universal like a Mozart Requiem and make it particular to a special moment in our life," states Fabio



Steve Hochstein

"Our idea is to give people a vessel, a space to maybe begin to unpack all that has been lost," says Orchestra of St. Luke's President and Executive Director **James Roe**.





Sylvia Etkin

The Dallas Symphony Orchestra and Chorus perform at Meyerson Symphony Center, led by guest conductor Robert Spano, in fall 2019. Fabio Luisi, who became the DSO's music director in 2020-21, will lead Mozart's Requiem this November.

Luisi, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra's music director, who will conduct the Requiem in November and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in May. "Everyone is free to do so for himself, but I don't do it publicly. The people come to the concert to think about different things, to have a break from normal life, and to have their lives elevated by the music that we are playing." The Dallas Symphony and Chorus will also present a semi-staged production of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, one of several operas planned by orchestras for 2021-22, including Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Verdi's *Otello* at the Cleveland Orchestra, and Stravinsky's opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex* at the San Francisco Symphony.

As audiences begin returning to concert halls, uncertainties remain, particularly as new COVID variants lurk and breakthrough infections of vaccinated people remain a threat. But for now, choral works are serving a long-accepted commemorative function, as seen in a concert planned for November at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. Bernard Labadie will conduct the (fully-vaccinated) Orchestra of St. Luke's, Musica Sacra chorus, and soloists in Haydn's *Te Deum* followed by Mozart's Requiem.

"We feel that society has yet to really have the space to grapple with what we have lost," says James Roe, the Orchestra of St. Luke's president and executive director. "We've been so focused on survival, but how we interact with the outside world is almost completely altered. Since so much of it has gone online and become digital and two-dimensional, our idea is to give people a vessel, a space to maybe begin to unpack all that has been lost." **S**

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Sylvia Etkin

The Dallas Symphony Orchestra and Music Director Fabio Luisi perform Verdi selections at Meyer-son Symphony Center, October 2020, with vocal soloists including mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton (standing, top left) and soprano Angela Meade (with back to camera).

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