

Summit Choral Society and conductor to celebrate their 25th Anniversary together

by Daniel Hathaway



On Saturday, October 25 at 7:30 pm in the University of Akron's E.J. Thomas Hall, Frank Jacobs will conduct the Masterworks Chorale of the Summit Choral Society in Johannes Brahms's *German Requiem*. The performance marks twenty-five years to the day since the chorus sang that work on its first concert.

"It seems like yesterday. Twenty-five years ago, we were just an upstart organization with no money," Jacobs recalled in a telephone conversation. "We did the concert at Cuyahoga Falls

High School in English with Brahms's original accompaniment of two pianos — we threw in harp and timpani for extra color. Now, 25 years later on the same date, we're doing it with full orchestra and in the way that it needs to be heard, in German. The music itself is so moving and powerful. It's a universal statement of what we all face in this human condition — death."

Though much has changed over that quarter-century, there are threads of continuity between those beginnings and today. When Jacobs first moved to Akron to be director of vocal activities at the University, his first performance at E.J. Thomas Hall was the Schubert A-flat Mass. "The concertmaster for that concert, a student at the time," Jacobs said, "has been playing many Summit Choral Society concerts over the years, and will be playing in the Brahms."

Jacobs also enjoys a strong sense of continuity in the Masterworks Chorale. "At least one-third have sung with me for fifteen to twenty years, and my associate and accompanist Bob Mollard and I have worked together for twenty-two years. Not too many directors and accompanists find themselves still together for that long a time and still enjoying it. Bob's temperament and mine are very different, and I'm sure that many

singers have found that the entertainment value in watching us interact is worth the price of admission.”

Thinking back to the launch of the organization, Jacobs chuckles about some innocent blunders. “We thought it was important to place the chorus geographically, so the original title was ‘The Central Summit County Choral Society.’ We quickly realized that was cumbersome and changed it to ‘The Summit Choral Society,’ but it took years to change that legally.”

One thing Jacobs and his colleagues did get right — in addition to forming the chorus — was the formation of a children’s choral program. “Early on, I wanted to do Britten’s *St. Nicholas* and assumed that it would be easy to make a couple of phone calls and arrange for a children’s choir to appear. How wrong I was. We formed our own and had between 60 and 70 kids show up for the first rehearsal in 1991. Obviously there was a niche to be filled. Soon we had to split it in two, then it wasn’t long before we got three choirs going.”

The Summit Children’s Choir has a busy schedule of its own, but a nice feature of the program is that it eventually helps feed singers into the adult chorus. “They arrive with a disciplined way of approaching music that makes the Masterworks Chorale so much better,” Jacobs said. “There are not so many programs with an established adult chorus that also have a thriving children’s program.”

In addition to the Brahms performance, Summit Choral Society will sing a series of traditional Christmas concerts by candlelight in December, then end its season with another of Jacob’s favorites, Johann Sebastian Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*.

That performance will also mark Jacobs’s last engagement with the choral society. He plans to retire at the end of the year, but he’s downplaying that fact in favor of a celebration. “I’ve tried to emphasize to the board and staff that the emphasis should be placed on the 25th Anniversary rather than on my decision to retire.”

A successor isn’t in the wings just yet. “There are various ways of making a transition,” Jacobs said. “In the performing arts, you get rid of one person before you bring on the other, but hopefully, that announcement will happen before I actually wave goodbye.”

In the meantime, Jacobs is concentrating on the two big concerts on his schedule. “Several singers who have lost parents or family members have expressed how much they’re looking forward to the Brahms. It’s dramatic, but it’s comforting. It doesn’t scare the daylights out of you. That’s the reason singers and audiences just keep coming back to it.” And the Bach passion? “It’s one of his most impactful works. I’ve done it four times before and every time I prepare it I sense that life is a little calmer. My whole existence is at peace when I study and work with Bach.”

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