

Robert Page, 89

by Kelly Ferjutz



‘Legacy’ might be the most overused word in the English language. But no word is more appropriate to describe American conductor Robert Page, who passed away at his home in Pittsburgh on Sunday, August 7. He was 89.

Born in Abilene, Texas on April 27, 1927, Page went on to become a beloved figure in Cleveland. He served as director of choruses for The Cleveland Orchestra from 1971 to 1989; assistant conductor of the Orchestra for 12 of those years; and chorus master of Cleveland Opera for 6 years. His work with the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus on their recording of Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana* won him a Grammy Award — one of his two.

Also closely affiliated with the communities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Page guest conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, taught at Temple and Carnegie Mellon Universities, and directed and conducted the Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh.

He was an enthusiastic ambassador of music, period.

If you’re like many other Clevelanders, you’ve probably attended one of The Cleveland Orchestra’s popular Christmas Concerts at Severance Hall. Page was responsible for expanding these concerts both in number and in repertoire, branching out from traditional Classical fare to popular, contemporary Christmas songs and even newly written holiday songs.

Local soprano Andrea Anelli, founder of Cleveland Opera Theater and director of ContempOpera Cleveland, recently shared with me her experience working with Page. “He was the chorus master for the first production I sang with Cleveland Opera. I

immediately felt I was part of something very alive, very thrilling! You understood what was expected — focus and passion — and the result was extremely fine musical artistry.”



As a former usher at Severance Hall, I was privileged to observe Page’s work for ten years. He was unfailingly cheerful and courteous, smile on his face, as he bustled — all 5½ feet of him — around the labyrinthine hallways of the building (pre-renovation).

And as a reviewer, I was lucky enough to attend and write about two very special concerts he conducted here in Cleveland. The first was a performance of Verdi’s *Requiem* in February 2007, presented by the Interfaith Hospitality Network of Greater Cleveland. Leading a 124-voice choir, four soloists, and a large orchestra that included several members of The Cleveland Orchestra, Page was not quite 80 years old at the time, but his vigor and vitality were that of a much younger man.

Two years later, in March 2009, Page led an outstanding presentation of Haydn’s oratorio *The Creation* at Fairmount Church. Again, it was a performance that would have knocked the socks off any audience, anywhere!

Passionate about the future of choruses, Robert Page co-founded Chorus America in 1977, serving as president of the organization from 1990 to 1993. He formed the Robert Page Singers (now the Cleveland Singers) in 1982, touring with the choir across Europe.

More recently, Page returned to Cleveland for several of the early seasons of WCLV's annual Jubilation! Elizabeth Stuart Church Choir Festival, serving as an honored member of the jury panel.

Page felt strongly that large choruses performing with orchestras should not be considered "amateur." If pay was not possible for these groups, he wanted to ensure them respect. To that end, he established the policy of having members of his Mendelssohn Choir re-audition every season. There might have been some quiet grumbling, but the quality that resulted was striking.

The musical world is perhaps quieter and less ebullient after the passing of this musical giant disguised as a man.

Second photo courtesy of The Cleveland Orchestra Archives.

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