

Cleveland Orchestra Youth Chorus: a conversation with Daniel Singer

by Mike Telin



“The members of the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Chorus are some of the best kids in their high school choral programs,” COYC acting director Daniel Singer said during a recent conversation. “When they come into this group they tear into learning new repertoire and tackle a professional masterwork like the *Te Deum* that is not dumbed down for kids in any way. They thrive on that challenge.”

On Sunday, February 25 at 7:00 pm in Severance Hall, the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra and Youth Chorus will come together for performances of Dvořák’s *Te Deum* featuring soprano Marian Vogel and baritone Brian Keith Johnson, and Hanson’s *Song of Democracy*. The concert, under the direction of Vinay Parameswaran, will also include Sibelius’s *Symphony No. 1*. Tickets are available [online](#).

Singer, who is in his seventh year as Director of Music at University School, said that somehow, Dvořák’s *Te Deum* has stayed off his musical radar. “It’s new to me, and it’s a wonderful piece. The *Stabat Mater* gets all the Dvořák choral music credit. The *Te Deum* was written for us Americans, although it had a great European reception as well, so it should be done more often.”

The work was premiered in 1892 at Carnegie Hall and featured a chorus of 250. Singer said that musically, the *Te Deum* finds Dvořák at the very beginning of his “American” style. “He wrote it for Jeanette Thurber and the National Conservatory in New York. This was right before he came to the U.S. but before he went to Iowa, and before he wrote the New World Symphony, the American Quartet, and the Cello Concerto.”

With its duration of roughly 20 minutes, how does Singer go about preparing a young 80-member chorus to achieve the concentration level the *Te Deum* requires? “It’s the same as with any chorus,” he said. “To make sure they stay in the game, so to speak, we spend a lot of time drilling notes and rhythm — although maybe a little more time than we would need to with The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus. The advantage of rehearsing that way is that the music becomes internalized. We’re now to the point where I imagine that many of them could perform the work from memory.”

Singer pointed out that like the *Te Deum*, Howard Hanson’s *Song of Democracy* was also written for a commemorative event and performed with large choral forces. “The Hanson was written for the 50th anniversary of the National Education Association and the Music Educators National Conference. They have changed their name but are still in existence and are the largest music education advocacy group in the United States.” In the work, Hanson sets excerpts from Walt Whitman’s “An Old Man’s Thoughts of School” and “Thou Mother with thy equal brood.”



On Tuesday, March 6 COYO and COYC will perform the Hanson at the Ohio Statehouse as part of [Music in our Schools Month](#). “We’re taking Cleveland’s best music students to perform a piece about the value of public education as a driving force for American democracy,” Singer said. “We’ve asked all of the students to sign a letter to their state senators and representatives inviting them to attend.”

Although Daniel Singer remains active as a performer singing with professional ensembles such as Quire Cleveland, he said that working with young singers is especially inspiring.

“I attended public high school in the north suburbs of Chicago and had wonderful teachers. They were so willing to go above and beyond to answer my questions and to challenge me and my fellow students. That experience was so valuable for me as a

musician and as a human being, that I knew that working with young people was something I wanted to do. And working with high school kids at any level — whether it's the Youth Chorus or my students at University School — I love watching how far they can come as musicians, but more importantly as people. I think that music is a wonderful vehicle to foster their emotional and social awareness. I love being part of that process and watching them grow.”

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