

Choral Arts Cleveland & Suburban Symphony to mark Martin Kessler's retirement at Maltz PAC

by Daniel Hathaway



Cleveland native Martin Kessler graduated from Heights High, then went off to Harvard College, where he conducted the student-run Bach Society Orchestra and Leverett House opera productions. After a year in Europe on a traveling fellowship, the composer-conductor came back to town for graduate studies, and went on to log impressive years of service with several area institutions.

After 32 years on the faculty of University School, where he taught until 2011, 38 years as conductor of the Suburban Symphony, and 15 years at the helm of Choral Arts Cleveland, Kessler will officially mark his retirement in a concert by Suburban and Choral Arts on Wednesday, May 16 at 7:30 pm at the Maltz Performing Arts Center in University Circle.

“There’s something youth-inducing about doing something repetitively,” Kessler said in a recent telephone conversation. “You feel like you’re the same person you were when you started.” The conductor added that he feels it’s better to leave a little bit early than a little bit too late. “My mother retired at 70 from a career as a psychology professor, then ran a bookstore for 20 years. I’m using her as a model.”

The May 16 concert will be devoted to the music of Leonard Bernstein, a longtime Kessler favorite. “We wanted to celebrate his anniversary with a performance that involved both chorus and orchestra, and the repertoire just fell into place,” he said. The program will include the *Chichester Psalms*, Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*, and selected scenes from *Candide*.

Kessler conducted the *Chichester Psalms* in a previous collaboration between Choral Arts and Suburban and earlier sang the work in performances led by Robert Shaw. “Shaw admitted that that’s the only piece he ever conducted that he wished he’d

written,” Kessler said. “He called it the ‘West Side Psalms,’” making the piece — originally written for England’s Chichester Cathedral — a good match with Bernstein’s Symphonic Dances. “Bernstein was a very brave soul in the challenges he put out there, not only making a British choir learn Hebrew, but also getting the New York Philharmonic to shout ‘Mambo!’”

Bernstein and Kessler crossed paths only on a few occasions. “He once came to a typical Harvard institution, afternoon sherry at Dunster House, and the resident music tutor asked me to host him,” Kessler said. “I met the limo and ushered him in, and then the whole afternoon became sort of a paintball tournament of cross purposes. Bernstein wanted to talk about politics, and we were waiting to hear life-changing insights about music. He didn’t want to have anything to do with things that were stuck-up and smug — and at that time, afternoon sherry was pretty smug!”

Later, Bernstein invited Kessler to attend a rehearsal for his final Young Persons Concert with the New York Philharmonic, an exploration of Beethoven’s *Fidelio*. “I took the \$10 air shuttle down from Boston and brought back two learnings,” Kessler said. “It was the dress rehearsal before the recording and Bernstein wanted to practice what he was going to say. He was at his verbal best, but the orchestra said, ‘We really need a runthrough.’ That was a lesson in not talking too much. Then he showed me his score of the *Leonore Overture*. I was such a greenhorn that I really didn’t know how to mark up a score — I only knew what I saw in rental scores that were full of chicken scratches in red and blue pencil. His score was pristine with just a tiny mark at the beginning of every phrase. That impressed me, because so often things happen at the beginning and end of phrases, and that obviates the need for all other markings.”

What plans does Martin Kessler have after retiring from his Cleveland posts? There’s the cottage he and his wife Joyce own in Provincetown. “Joyce is retiring from the faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Art, and we initially planned to do ‘an adventure year’ there, but the Bomb Cyclone in January flooded the first floor with two feet of water.” Kessler thinks that may have been a gentle warning against wintering on Cape Cod. “We wanted it to be like *A Year in Provence*, but it might have turned into something more like *The Shining*. It’s right at the extreme end of the Eastern Time Zone, and it gets dark and lonely at 4 pm in winter.”

While looking forward to repair estimates, Kessler is contemplating three projects that have awaited more of his free time. “I’m writing an idiosyncratic book about conducting — not about repertoire or technique, but more of a report from the front lines like Anthony Bourdain’s *Kitchen Confidential*. I also want to teach myself a computer notation program like Sibelius and put together a little chapbook of

Christmas Carols I've written over the years. And then I have an unfinished chamber opera I started fifteen years ago. I wrote the three easy scenes and left the fourth more difficult one for another day, and now it's the other day."

Most of all, Kessler is looking forward to being free of non-musical distractions. "I won't stop conducting, but I want to get out of the constant stream of administrative duties, something that's been exacerbated by the age of email."

Asked to reflect on some high points of his music-making in Cleveland, Martin Kessler mentioned a performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* with three choirs at First Baptist Church. "I somehow talked them into that piece — it took a lot of arm-twisting to convince people that we could do it. Then there was the recent *Carmen* at the Masonic Temple, a particular joy because it was a Suburban Symphony anniversary and there was extra money to hire two world-class vocal soloists. And there were the three concerts I conducted at Severance Hall. Two of them were with Suburban alone, and the third was Robert Cohen's *Alzheimer Stories* with Suburban, Choral Arts Cleveland, and the glee clubs of Laurel and University Schools. All of those performances turned into very good recordings I'll get to enjoy in my dotage."

Published on ClevelandClassical.com May 8, 2018.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)