

Goddard bids farewell to Master Singers with all-Brahms concert on August 12

by Daniel Hathaway



For his final performance with Master Singers Inc., the Akron-based chorus he founded 17 years ago, conductor J.D. Goddard will lead two of his all-time favorite works by Johannes Brahms — the Fourth Symphony and *A German Requiem*. The free concert, featuring some 70 singers and full orchestra, will take place on Sunday, August 12 at 3:00 pm in SS. Cosmas and Damian Church in Twinsburg.

Goddard and his singers have logged some impressive statistics over the years, having performed 61 major works, 71 world premieres, and 22 American premieres. “That’s what I set out to do,” the 73-year-old conductor said in a telephone conversation. “All I wanted to perform was classical choral literature and world premieres. There are many very good choral organizations out there that do pops and barbershop — far more than sing classical music— but I tell people up front that our motto is ‘preserve the past and premiere the future of classical

choral literature.’ Come sing with us and see if that’s for you.”

The conductor’s invitation to ‘come sing with us’ is one of Goddard’s guiding principles. “We have an open-door policy and there are virtually no auditions,” he said. “Some conductors want to audition people out, but we audition to include, not exclude.” That system seems to have worked for nearly two decades, and to some extent, his

singers self-select themselves. “The majority of people who come and sit in on a rehearsal don’t come back because they realize it really *is* just classical music.”

Those who stick around become loyalists. Goddard notes that between 15 and 20 current members of MSI have been there from the beginning, and the chorus has always had what he calls a “tremendous” bass section. “That includes people who can’t match pitches without having someone next to them, and who couldn’t pass an audition for another ensemble,” he said. “And half of my group can’t read music.”

To make it all work, Goddard schedules 12 to 13 rehearsals for every MSI concert, and saves time by dispensing with at least one familiar ritual of choral rehearsals. “I don’t do warmups,” he said. “I jokingly say to them, ‘Scream and yell in the car on the way,’ then I choose the easiest piece and have them read through it both as a warmup and a way to learn the music.”

How has Goddard chosen the composers for all those world- and American premieres? “I went on the internet to the Choral Public Domain Library, clicked on modern composers, and went right down the line,” he said. “I spent hours and days listening to their works and when I hit on something I liked, I got in touch with the composers and asked their permission. I told them that we didn’t have the money to pay them, but we could at least give them a premiere.”

Among the conductor’s finds were Jason Metheney, who has become MSI’s resident composer, Gonçalo Lourenço, Ramiro Real, Fabio Fresi, Costas Dafnis, and Andrea Angelini — hardly household names in the US, but known in European circles. Goddard has also encouraged MSI members to contribute their own compositions, and two of them have had their works performed.

For major choral works, Goddard’s tastes lean toward the expressive styles of the 19th century. “I refer to myself as a sloppy Romantic. I could take a piece of Gregorian Chant and throw rubatos and rallentandos into it,” he said, adding that his singers make fun of him because his tempos are usually slower than normal. But though he favors big, Romantic works, he doesn’t usually pick crowd-pleasers. “I choose what I like, but it has to move me.”

The two Brahms works on MSI’s August 12 concert definitely move Goddard. He’s performed the *Requiem* before, but the orchestral work has been a longtime dream. “I’ve wanted to do the Fourth Symphony ever since I heard it in junior high school — especially the second movement.” For this event, the conductor has hired an orchestra that boasts some of the best freelance players in Northeast Ohio, and he has abandoned

his usual policy of performing 60-75 minute concerts without intermission. “This will be the longest program we’ve ever done.”

After his double-Brahms farewell performance, J.D. Goddard is contemplating a retirement largely to be spent on the golf course, “unless someone calls me and wants me to fill in for a rehearsal or a performance.” MasterSingers has engaged a new conductor, but Goddard notes that the board is experiencing some challenges in farming out the rest of his former duties. “I started MSI with \$10,000 of my own money, and have done all the programming, publicity, and grant writing for the group over the years.” But as the chorus makes plans for its future, Goddard said he is making only one demand on the board to continue his legacy: “that anyone can sing in this group.”

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