

West Shore Chorale to sing Mozart, Conte & Bernstein at St. John's Cathedral

by Daniel Hathaway



At the midpoint of its 51st season, The West Shore Chorale will sing a program on the Helen D. Schubert concert series at St. John's Cathedral on Friday, March 1 at 7:30 pm. John Drotleff, who has conducted the Rocky River-based chorus since 1984, will lead his singers and an instrumental ensemble in music by Mozart, David Conte, and Bernstein.

I caught up with Drotleff by telephone at his home in Lakewood to ask about Friday's program, and began by complimenting him on choosing what must be a challenging program.

"It's challenging not only because of the music, but because of the languages involved," Drotleff said.

"Singing Hebrew in *Chichester Psalms* takes us into deeper waters than Latin, but even Mozart's *Vespers*, K. 339, has a learning curve. We're used to singing the Latin words of masses and Te Deums, but the *Vespers* texts are all from Psalms and less familiar."

Drotleff noted that he is programming only portions of the Mozart, an idea he got from Robert Shaw. "I first heard K. 339 in a three-movement version he selected and I thought it made a very nice set. We'll sing the first, fifth, and fourth movements — two fast choruses with the 'Laudate Dominum' in the middle. Our wonderful soprano soloist is Debra Chelko, a member of the chorus."

Drotleff's choice of David Conte's *September Sun* continues the chorale's long relationship with the composer, a Lakewood native who is now based in San Francisco.

“David wrote it for William Trafka and the choir of St. Bartholomew’s Church in New York, who commissioned it after the 9/11 tragedy. One of his most popular pieces, it’s based on a poem by John Sterling Walker, who had written the *Elegy for Matthew Shepherd* that David also set to music. I’d had the score in my library for a long time waiting for the right opportunity to perform it. Last year David Conte spoke at our 50th anniversary and mentioned this piece, and I thought, this is the perfect time to do it.”

Drotleff said that the first and last of its four movements are an instrumental prelude and postlude played by strings. “The second, with difficult modulations, is for unaccompanied chorus, and the third, ‘In New York’ is hectic — it sounds like you’re in the middle of a street in the city. Those of us who remember 9/11 will recall that it was a beautiful bright, sunny day, and the words ‘O Sun’ come back time and time again. It’s rather emotional. People have said to me that they can’t get through it without crying when they practice it at home.”



West Shore Chorale will end their concert with Leonard Bernstein’s *Chichester Psalms* in a version for piano, harp, and percussion. “The second-movement boy soprano solo will be sung by Andrew Swislocki, an eighth-grader at Rocky River Middle School who’s the son of an elementary music teacher in Avon Lake.”

Drotleff reminded me that the Bernstein work, commissioned by Chichester Cathedral for England’s Southern Cathedrals Festival, sounds a lot like the composer’s musical theater music — and that’s no coincidence.

“Bernstein was on sabbatical the year he wrote it, and he planned to write a musical on Thornton Wilder’s play *The Skin of our Teeth*. That didn’t pan out, but when he got the Chichester commission, he reused themes from the unfinished musical in the *Psalms*. One of them is the basis for the beginning of the middle movement. The music when the male chorus interrupts the soprano solo was originally going to be used in the rumble scene between the Sharks and the Jets in *West Side Story*.”

After their concert at St. John’s Cathedral this weekend, West Shore Chorale will start rehearsing for their final concert of the season — Parts II and III of Handel’s

Messiah. “He premiered it in Dublin in April, and always thought of it as an Easter piece, although it’s usually associated with Christmas in the U.S. Parts II and III make a very satisfying program and include wonderful choruses that don’t get sung that often,” Drotleff said. That concert is scheduled for Sunday, April 28 at Magnificat Performing Arts Center in Rocky River, and will include choral scholars from local high schools.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 26, 2019.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)