

Mozart's "Great" *Mass*: A conversation with Lisa Wong

by Rory O'Donoghue



This Friday, August 2 at 7:00 pm in Severance Hall, the Blossom Festival Chorus will join The Cleveland Orchestra for a one-off performance of Mozart's "Great" *Mass in c-minor*. Last Sunday, the Chorus and Orchestra brought the house down at Blossom in their Aretha Franklin tribute concert, with vocalists Capathia Jenkins and Ryan Shaw in the spotlight.

"It's a busy summer in Cleveland," Director of Choruses Lisa Wong said over the phone last week, "but it's a fun one." I got the chance to talk with Wong by telephone about her work with The Cleveland Orchestra Choruses in anticipation of this Friday's concert, the latest installment of their *Summers@Severance* Series.

Rory O'Donoghue: How did you get started in choral music?

Lisa Wong: Interestingly, the very first choral and orchestral piece that I ever encountered was this Friday's selection, Mozart's *Mass in c-minor*. I sang it as an undergraduate music student, and we had a guest conductor who came to our university and worked with our choruses for that concert. It was a singularly influential moment in my life — I was so inspired by this wonderful conductor. As it turned out, that was the late Robert Page, who was director of choruses for The Cleveland Orchestra at the time. I didn't know what that title meant, exactly, but I knew how inspired I was by the way this music bubbles up with emotion.

I started as an instrumental major as an undergrad, but it all changed after this one experience sent me on a lifelong journey chasing a love of singing. From there, I went on to study choral conducting in grad school, and ended up teaching at The College of Wooster after I finished my doctoral degree. I joined the Orchestra Chorus, then became the assistant director, and now here we are full circle: I'm in the director position, readying the Mozart *Mass*.

RO: What are some of the challenges of leading the Cleveland Orchestra choruses?

LW: The chorus is completely volunteer. We have a few members who are professional musicians, but many others make their careers in other fields. This set-up has particular strengths, but also challenges. There's such a great diversity in the group, experience-wise — some people have been active with the Chorus for 25, 30, 40 years, and some have never sung in a choir like this before. It's amazing to have all of these people who have spent their lives performing these great works singing side-by-side with newcomers. We have teachers, accountants — people coming in from all fields — and they're all bringing in different knowledge. The challenge is, because they're performing with The Cleveland Orchestra, they must perform at the very highest level, as if they were an all-professional chorus. Above all, the greatest strength is that everyone is there because they all love this music, and all truly love singing. As a director, you couldn't ask for more than that — it inspires me, and it positively influences their dedication.

RO: How do you bring new people in?

LW: We hold auditions every year, typically at the end of the season. We do a couple of rounds over the summer as well. We're always taking new people in, and hoping to combine the talents of those who have made a very long commitment to the Orchestra with people who are just discovering its magic for the first time.

RO: What's your rehearsal schedule like?

LW: Typically we rehearse once a week during the season. If it's a concert week, then we're there more often, rehearsing with the orchestra throughout the week. During the summer, it depends on the pieces we're doing, but it's usually twice a week.

RO: And for the Mozart Mass?

LW: Before we joined the Orchestra for this piece, we had seven rehearsals, just chorus and piano. After we've gone through that preliminary stage for a massive work like this, the conductor arrives for one rehearsal with chorus alone, and then we join up with the Orchestra and put everything together.

RO: After you've spent so much time rehearsing with the Chorus, what is it like to turn over the reins to someone else for the performance?

LW: It's a really interesting situation — I'm not sure if there's any equivalent in the music world. I actually really love it, because the rehearsal process is most important to me. Even when I'm singing, it's my favorite part. It is so rewarding to me to prepare the group, hand it off to somebody who truly loves the performance aspect, and then watch that person take it to the next level with the Orchestra. In an ideal situation, I would know everything that the conductor wants in advance, but that's not always the case, simply because of time constraints. A lot of the time, I have to make some assumptions about what the conductor might want, down to even the basic things, like tempo markings, articulations, musical style, etc. If it's a conductor I've worked with multiple times, it becomes a lot easier to make those assumptions, but a conductor that's new to me is much more difficult.

RO: How about the fabulous program of Aretha Franklin's music with Capathia Jenkins — what was preparing that like?

LW: It was such a wonderful project for the chorus. This is a group that works on strictly classical repertoire 95% of the time, so this is completely different, but a very welcome change in our repertoire. It was a combination of Motown classics, like *Respect* and *Think*, but we also had great gospel arrangements of *Amazing Grace* and *America the Beautiful*. The main challenge for the chorus is to excel at all these styles of music. Very early on in my time in Cleveland, I learned that we apply the same level of excellence and dedication to all genres of music. It doesn't matter if it is Brahms, a Christmas carol, or Motown — we want everything to be at the highest level.

RO: Speaking of different styles, the Chorus is joining the Orchestra for another film score at the end of the summer.

LW: Yes, it's so much fun. We started the summer with the first *Harry Potter* film, which was a terrific experience because we combined our children's chorus with the youth chorus and with members of the adult festival chorus. It was a great family experience for the organization. At the end of the summer, we'll conclude with the Danny Elfman score to *Batman*, and we're again inviting some members of the youth chorus to sing with the adults. The chorus really enjoys doing the films. Especially with a group like The Cleveland Orchestra, sometimes as an audience member you forget that you're hearing the music live, because the synchronization is so precise and the instrumentation is so wonderful. Again, it's a lovely change of pace from the bulk of the music that we do.

RO: It's such a multifaceted job.

LW: Yes. But it's so wonderful for me. I love learning new music, and learning about new music. It's a thrilling process.

The concert on August 2 at 7:00 pm features a single, incomplete work — “the grand mass for double chorus and orchestra that Mozart began writing in 1782 after his wedding to fulfill a vow,” as Daniel Hathaway described it in a [preview](#) for this publication. Guest conductor Matthew Halls will lead The Cleveland Orchestra, soloists, and the Blossom Festival Chorus. Tickets are available [here](#).

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