

Akron Symphony Chorus: a conversation with assistant director Karen Ni Bhroin

by Daniel Hathaway



Through a lucky series of encounters, Irish conductor Karen Ni Bhroin (pronounced *Knee VRIN*) found her way first to graduate studies at Kent State University, then to the assistant conductor's position with the Akron Symphony Chorus, and most recently — the news came down just this morning — to her appointment as assistant conductor with the Winston-Salem Symphony.

In that second capacity, the 29-year-old conductor is preparing the Akron Symphony Chorus for its performance of the Mozart

Requiem under Christopher Wilkins on Saturday evening, February 22 at E.J. Thomas Hall.

I reached Ni Bhroin by telephone to ask how that chain of events got started. “I had been freelancing in Dublin for five years after my undergraduate degree at Trinity College, and in 2013 I met Jungho Kim, who was finishing his doctorate at Eastman,” she said. “We were Facebook friends, and he posted in 2018 that he was looking for an assistant at Kent State, and that’s how it all started. I applied and I won the position.

“Similarly, last year I saw that the Akron Symphony Chorus was looking for an assistant. I had been assistant with the RTÉ Philharmonic Choir, which like the Akron chorus is an auditioned group, and sings with the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra, the only professional symphony in Ireland. I was really keen to get back into symphonic chorus work. Dr. Kim said, just apply, so I did!”

How did she end up preparing the Mozart *Requiem*? “Chris Albanese was appointed chorus director in July, but by then, he was already tied into commitments at Indiana

University for this weekend. I was free, and so Chris and I have been tag-teaming rehearsals up until the final week.”

The Akron forces will be performing the version of the *Requiem* completed by Franz Xaver Süssmayr at the request of Mozart’s widow. Although several others have supplied the movements Mozart left incomplete or only partially orchestrated when he died, arguing that Süssmayr’s work was inadequate, Ni Bhroin likes his version. “I think that the colors he gets from the *Lachrymosa* onwards are as close as you can come to Mozart.”

Ni Bhroin began rehearsing the chorus with Christopher Wilkins’ score markings as a guide. “As with any choir that you’ll be handing off to another conductor, you want them to be as flexible as possible. We covered some details last Monday night when Chris Wilkins sat in on our rehearsal and tidied up small things.

“My biggest challenge has been vowel sounds,” she said. “I just consider everything that we’re singing as a different language, even if it is English, and I try to think how I would teach that if it were Italian or German or French. I try to incorporate vowels into our warmup materials as well.” And in that realm of language, Ni Bhroin admits that she’s been teased by her American choristers when she invites them to “use the loo” whenever they need to.

The next chapter in Karen Ni Bhroin’s career is the latest in that chain of happy coincidences. “You’re one of the first to know that I’ve been appointed the new assistant conductor of the Winston-Salem Symphony — the [news release](#) came out right before you called,” she said. “It’s a full time position, but I’ll be keeping my job in Akron. I’ll be assistant to Timothy Redmond, the music director, covering classical and pops concerts, participating in educational activities, mentoring six youth orchestras and conducting the oldest.”

Returning to the Mozart *Requiem*, Ni Bhroin said that Saturday’s performance will feature “a really good balance of beautiful soloists,” and reveal both the tenderness and passion of the chorus. “It’s such a dramatic piece, like a mini opera or oratorio. It’s anguished three-quarters of the way through, but then a light opens up before it resumes its absolutely relentless progress to the very end. It’s one long thread.”

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