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# Cleveland Orchestra Chorus Celebrates 75th birthday

by Mike Telin



For many orchestras, programming choral works require hiring or contracting an external group, leading to inconsistent styles and varying degrees of success. However, as Krista Mitchell points out in her article *Individual Dedication, Collective Artistry: A History of The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus,* The Cleveland Orchestra reaps the benefits of an in-house, all-volunteer chorus.

On Saturday, October 24 at 7:30 pm in Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center, Lisa Wong will lead "The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus at 75." The program includes John Corigliano's *Fern Hill* and the U.S. premiere of Eric Whitacre's *Eternity in an Hour.* Tickets are available online.

Although 2026 marks the 75th birthday of this esteemed organization, it took a few tries before the ensemble was fully realized. Adella Prentiss Hughes made the first attempt to create an all-volunteer chorus as early as 1920. Another attempt to establish a house chorus came in 1931, but it too was short-lived.

Then, as Mitchell writes, In the fall of 1950, George Szell attended a meeting for Cleveland Orchestra Trustees to plead for a standing chorus, believing that performing more choral works would entice a larger portion of the Cleveland public to attend. In the spring of 1951, Szell conducted Ludwig van Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as a trial run for a volunteer chorus. In the late spring of 1953, The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus finally sang its debut under the baton of Szell with Giuseppe Verdi's *Requiem*.

During its 75 years The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus has garnered an impressive list of directors, including Robert Shaw (1956–1967), Margaret Hillis (1969–1971), Robert Page (1971–1989), Gareth Morrell (1989–1998), and Robert Porco (1998–2017).

In the 2017-2018 season, Lisa Wong Served as acting director of choruses and was named Director of Choruses in 2018 by Franz Welser-Möst.



"It's such an honor to be part of that legacy," Wong said during a telephone interview. "I'm so grateful to Franz Welser-Möst for programming such great works for the chorus and orchestra this season."

Wong said that when planning the first concert of the Chorus's 75th year, they immediately thought of Eric Whitaker. "We've always had great experiences working with him and lucky for us, the stars aligned."

Whitacre's *Eternity in an Hour* is a Cleveland Orchestra Co-Commission and was first performed by the BBC Singers under the direction of the composer in September of 2024. The piece is described as a meditation on the first four lines of William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence."

Wong said that the 60-minute work is structured in eight movements played without pause and is scored for percussion (crotales, finger cymbals), piano, cello, electronics, and mixed chorus. "Eric is going to conduct and manipulate the electronics."

The program will open with John Corigliano's Dylan Thomas–inspired *Fern Hill*. She noted that the Whitaker and Corigliano are thematically related. "Eric's is set to a short text about the passing of time as is John's, and they are both gorgeous."

Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem* (A German Requiem) will be conducted by Petr Popelka on November 5,7, and 8. Franz Welser-Möst will lead Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* on January 14 and 16 in Cleveland and on January 19 in New York's Carnegie Hall. And on Thursday, May 27, Welser-Möst will be on the podium for Haydn's oratorio *The Creation* featuring soloists Joélle Harvey, Kai Kluge, and Ludwig Mittelhammer.

"Those three big works all require vocal stamina, Wong said. "I'm so excited that Franz chose the Haydn, because he conducted it during his first season as Music Director of The Cleveland Orchestra. And with this year being his final season, it's just very special."

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