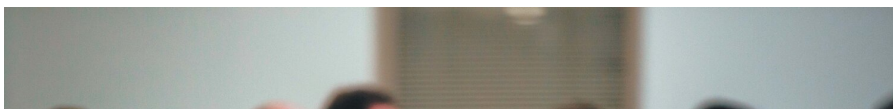




Voices of the North Carolina Symphony

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By Cherie Ann Vick





What would the holidays be without special music? Whether your taste runs to popular songs, Christmas carols, brass groups, or bell choirs, there is something special for the ears this holiday season.

One very special concert is Handel’s *Messiah*, scheduled for December 6th and 7th at Meymandi Concert Hall in the Duke Energy Center for the Performing Arts. It will be performed by the North Carolina Symphony, soloists, and the North Carolina Master Chorale, the Symphony’s resident chorus.

This latter group is comprised of 180 volunteers, all chosen through open auditions each August. While vocal ability is certainly important in Master Chorale candidates, previous ensemble experience is critical. “If a person has had lots of vocal training but has never sung in an ensemble, that can sometimes be problematic,” explains Al Sturgis, the group’s director since 1993. “We typically find singers who have sung in choruses either in high school, college, or other semi-professional community ensembles in other cities or markets. We have a lot of folks moving to Raleigh right now; I would say most of my auditionees are people moving [here] from other areas.”

Rehearsals for the Chorale’s full performance season begin on the last Tuesday in August and continue throughout the school year. Singers sign in and take seats in their sections. Sturgis begins warmups promptly at 7:30, then directs the choir to the evening’s work. Baton in hand, he moves the group forward, stopping as needed to coach the dynamics, emphasis, vowel sounds, and



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placement of consonants. He doesn't explain as much as demonstrate, singing in the bass clef one moment then moving in falsetto to the treble to quickly convey what he wants. If pitches are still shaky, he assigns measures for homework. A singer undertaking a new work might spend weekends listening to recordings and practicing outside the rehearsal.

Because careful marking of the scores is critical to a quality performance, each section has a leader who serves as intermediary between the section and the conductor. Cathy Brawner, the alto section leader and a 30-year member, takes particularly good notes and keeps track of markings for dynamics, and breaths. (Yes, the conductor decides where the singers can breathe.) "Because AI is very consistent over time, when he repeats a performance, I will send out the notes already in my score to members of the section in advance so they can have AI's markings in front of them before we even start rehearsals."

For this *Messiah*, Sturgis has selected a portion of the chorus—about 60 members—for their knowledge of the work and vocal flexibility. Singers need to do the melismatic passages (singing of a single syllable across several quick notes) with articulation. That means a voice that is not too heavy or too dark, with an understanding of Baroque style. At the first rehearsal, he will center everyone's attention on unified articulation and meaning of the text. He will coach some of the more challenging choruses: *For Unto Us a Child Is Born*, *He Shall Purify*, and *His Yoke Is Easy*. "His Yoke Is Easy is a tricky one," Sturgis says.

Grant Llewellyn, the NC Symphony's music director, will attend at least one of the two piano rehearsals and let the singers know any special interpretation he wants for his performance of *Messiah* with the Master Chorale. There will then be two rehearsals at Meymandi Hall with the orchestra the week of the performance. This is Sturgis' hand-off to Llewellyn, though Sturgis will attend these rehearsals and later email his chorale with any suggestions.

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Here's what's coming up!

July 2020						
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Reflecting on *Messiah*, Jack Neely, a 16-year member and the tenor section leader, says, “This is one of those unique pieces where every time you perform this work, you come away with something new. There is some new aspect you learn, some bit of technique that becomes better, some higher plane of existence that you get a glimpse of. There are very few works that are like that, and this is the genius of Handel.”

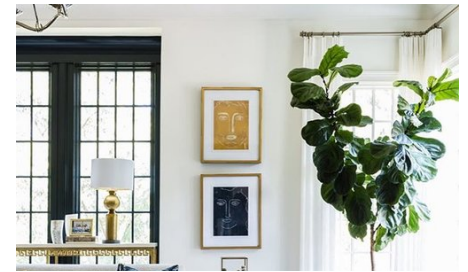
So when the tenor soloist finishes making the “rough places plain”, and Llewellyn cues the alto section, be prepared to hear the glory of the Lord in a fresh, new way.



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