

Cantata to contemporary

Bach Society of Dayton salutes American masters

By KATRINA ERESMAN

Dayton, as our readers likely know by now, is full of surprises. It always seems to have something up its sleeve, whether it's indie movies, extensive bike paths, outdoor adventures, craft beer or an eclectic selection of music by American composers performed by a hard-working choral group that has been going at it for 13 years.

The Bach Society of Dayton was formed in 2002 by a group of enthused singers left from the previous incarnation, Dayton Bach Society, which ran from 1974-2002. These choral singers had a love for, yes, Bach, but also adored performing pieces by other classical and contemporary composers. The passion of this dedicated group—now exceeding 60 accomplished members—shows in its 2015-16 season opener, *Salute to American Masters*.

"There's something here for everybody," says John Neely, music director since the group's conception in 2002. "There are old American tunes and there are spirituals and there are some contemporary pieces for the contemporary sound, some unusual harmonies, but there's something for everybody."

And you should take his word for it. Some people might be a little intimidated by the name "Bach" and assume the music will be out of reach to the average listener. *Au contraire*, this performance was carefully designed to present the best of a breadth of genres.

"When we do one of these potpourri-type programs," Neely says, "it's got to have variety."

What determines a season opener's theme and pieces varies. Last year, the choir performed alongside an orchestra. This year, they're taking a cue from the *American Mosaic* program at the Schuster Center.

"We sang two pieces with the orchestra over there," Neely remembers, "so we thought... we'd continue that American theme. And so we're doing some of the pieces again."

These recycled pieces, which will serve as openers to the Oct. 25 performance, are two excerpts from *The Testament of Freedom* by Randall Thompson. Thompson's piece was released in the mid 1940s for men's chorus and piano accompaniment as a nod to Thomas Jefferson.



Music Director John Neely will lead the Bach Society of Dayton in *Salute to American Masters* on Oct. 25 at Kettering Adventist Church

The group will be joined by its own accompanist, R. Alan Kimbrough, and will also be accompanied by a second pianist, Debbie Lindley.

An additional two guest performers will add a special spark to the evening. "For the 'Five Hebrew Love Songs' [by American composer Eric Whitacre], we have Aurelian Oprea," Neely says.

Oprea is associate concertmaster at the Dayton Philharmonic and will be the guest violinist for the evening. The violin will play alongside piano and chorus as they perform a collection of songs sung in Hebrew.

When I ask Neely which piece is his favorite, this one makes the cut.

"It's whatever I'm rehearsing at the moment," he laughs. "I know that's an epic cop out, but... the 'Hebrew Love Songs' are pretty special pieces."

Also joining the group is baritone soloist William Henry Caldwell, who will perform on "Old American Songs" by Aaron Copland.

The group will do another piece by Copland as well, "Andante semplice" from *Sonata for Violin and Piano*. Copland was a prominent composer in the mid-20th century and is known for being at the forefront of American-style compositions. His style is known for being particularly accessible.

Perhaps one of the more familiar styles contributing to the "Salute to American Masters" performance is the spirituals. These beautiful, professional renditions of a rather soulful style of music will likely ring a bell for many listeners. The chorus will perform old classics like "Hush! Somebody's Callin' My Name" arranged by Brazeal Dennard and "Soon-a Will Be Done" arranged by William Dawson. Both Dennard and Dawson were African-American choir directors, known for their intrinsic understanding and appreciation of the genre and history of spirituals.

When it comes to the pieces and their arrangements, the selection process is a group effort. And in its final

stages, one must step back and look at the performance like a formula—what mixes best?

Ultimately, as music director, Neely has the final say.

"We have a repertoire committee," he says. "We just kind of toss things around, and then I do a whole lot of research and pull out pieces and just see what will fit together in a good recipe."

The pieces that make up *Salute to American Masters* were chosen for their similar roots and their divergent styles. The composer, arrangers, singers and musicians who have in some way contributed to this performance all share at least two things—their origin and the passion for carrying on proud traditions in music.

The evening of music will close out with two American folk songs that many are sure to recognize—"Oh Shenandoah," which has been around since at least the first half of the 19th century, and "Cindy," slightly younger but still a classic. Neely, always conscientious of the arrangements, expects them to be well-received.

"Those are pretty popular tunes that people would know," he says. "And they're really fantastic arrangements."

Bach Society of Dayton will perform Salute to American Masters Sunday, Oct. 25 at 4 p.m. at the Kettering Adventist Church, 3939 Stonebridge Road in Kettering. Parking is free and the facility is handicap accessible. For tickets and more information, please visit bachsocietyofdayton.org or call 937.294.2224.



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