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## Richmond Symphony Chorus turns 40

By BONNIE NEWMAN DAVIS



Beethoven's spiritual-laden "Missa Solemnis" has been described as so complex that listeners often get lost in it.

Erin R. Freeman, associate conductor and James Erb Choral Chair as director of the Richmond Symphony Chorus, is determined that won't happen when the chorus celebrates its 40th anniversary in two upcoming performances with the symphony.

Small-framed and wiry, Freeman was a mass of energy when leading the 130-member chorus in a recent 2½-hour rehearsal of Beethoven's epic, rarely heard work. Freeman's assured, nimble hand movements persuaded altos and sopranos to sync with resonant tenors and bass. Precise piano chords enhanced the mood unfolding at Richmond CenterStage.

It's clear that Freeman is as in tune with chorus members as they are with her. Freeman took over the chorus four years ago when the founding director, James Erb, retired from the position. Erb remains a member of the chorus.

In 1971, Erb established a standard chorus and orchestra repertoire, including Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," St.

John Passion" and "Mass in B. Minor." Other well-known standards include Haydn's "Creation," Beethoven's "Symphony No. 9" and Mendelssohn's "Elijah." Through the years, Handel's "Messiah," performed with the Richmond Symphony, has become a holiday favorite.

It's a demanding schedule for members, who rehearse and perform several months throughout the year for no pay. Although Freeman said each member probably has a different answer, she thinks that most do it because they love singing.

"It's an opportunity to sing with the orchestra and also to see what you're capable of doing," she said during a rehearsal break. "It's such a human experience filled with emotion."

Although chorus members are volunteers, they hardly can be considered novices. Many serve as choir directors for their churches and other organizations, and others are music educators.

Maria J.K. Everett, a member of the chorus for 14 years, leaves her job as executive director of the Freedom of Information Advisory Council to attend weekly chorus rehearsals.

A trained pianist who sings alto, Everett describes her participation as an avocation and hobby. Strong camaraderie among members is an added bonus, she said.

Steve Cates, who sings bass, was one of the chorus' first members.

"I sang with Erb in college and he really instilled a love of classical music and precision," Cates said. "It's good to be around people of like mind."

Freeman, 37, credits chorus manager Barbara Baker for keeping everyone on track, including herself. Music section leaders serve as Freeman's second or third eye during rehearsals, helping troubleshoot and providing feedback after rehearsals.

In addition to its seasonal schedule, the symphony chorus performs for organizations and schools throughout the state.

Freeman, who has a doctorate in musical arts choral conducting, studied under legendary choral conductor Robert Shaw, who was the guest conductor in the Richmond ensemble's first performance of "Missa Solemnis" in 1971. Richmond's enthusiastic and supportive audience is part of the reason the chorus has survived for 40 years, Freeman said.

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