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Conductor Freeman Discusses New Role, Fall Concert

By Steven Dawson

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Dr. Erin Freeman is quite the busy woman these days. Freeman, professor of music and the new conductor of the AU Symphony Orchestra, teaches three courses, researches music, leads rehearsals, and conducts performances, all while remaining involved with outside ensembles. She is directing the orchestra in the upcoming *Storm of Passion* concert.

Tell me a little about your background.

I received my undergraduate degree in vocal performance from Northwestern University. I have a master's in conducting with a choral emphasis from Boston University and a doctorate in orchestral conducting from Peabody. I find exhilaration in combining all of those; the vocal, instrumental, and conducting. One informs the other for me. Instrumentalists should sing and singers should think technically.

Where were you before AU?

I was working as the associate conductor of the Richmond Symphony. This is my fifth year doing that. Actually, I still go back and forth and I split my time between the two, which is fun. I have a lot of support in both places that allows me to be doing both things right now. I think my work with a professional orchestra informs my teaching and vice versa.

What brought you to AU?

I've always really liked being in an academic environment, because you have so many great colleagues around you who give you new ideas and fresh approaches to what you are doing. And, at AU in particular, it is exciting to be in a building where you have not just music colleagues, but you have colleagues from theatre, visual art, art history, and arts administration. You have all these ideas flowing back and forth, even in the copy room and along the halls. You get this great exchange of information. I also really like sharing my love of classical music and sharing how classical music can relate to who we are as a society, and I have an opportunity to do that here.

How, in your opinion, does classical music relate to society?

For me, music is the ultimate human activity. It has a communal element; you have to have at least two people involved in the process—the player and the listener—though it's normally a lot more. But it's not only that: You also have the composer, you have the person who created the instrument, and you have the person who built the space in which you are playing the work. There are so many different elements. And when you have a full orchestra or a chorus, that's even more of a community.

But on the other hand, it is an individual art. Everyone comes at the music with their own ideas, emotional attachment, emotional reasons for listening to it, and their own background. Everyone has their own approach. Also, it is temporal. Once music starts, you shouldn't stop it. You have to keep going, just as in life. It's intellectual too, because you always have the opportunity to have some kind of theoretical analysis or historical analysis of it, which feeds our need to learn. It's emotional. It's spiritual. It's all those things that we are as humans. Particularly now when we are losing the ability to have concrete things in this economy, now is when we need to connect with that through music even more.

Tell me about the upcoming concert, *Storm of Passion*.

It started off with the idea that we wanted to do some Mozart, and the piece that I chose for this ensemble was Mozart's Symphony No. 25, one of the two symphonies that are in a minor key. It's not a typical Mozart piece. Often with Mozart, you feel his operatic background in the beautiful, long melodies. This one doesn't have that. This has the other side of opera, the drama and the passion, the quick dynamic changes. I was inspired by that, so I took the Mozart piece and found music from different time periods and countries in which to express the same type of emotion.

On one hand, we have passion and drama in the form of Camille Saint Saëns's "Danse Bachannale," which is this great, over-the-top party in which this false love affair of Samson and Delilah begins. And on the other hand, we have this great ballet, *Gayaneh*, by Armenian-Russian composer Khachaturian, in which he, through music, tells the tale of betrayal and treason and love mixed with this great Armenian folk music. He really locks into the passion of that story.

Is there community involvement with the AU Symphony Orchestra?

We have a several members of the orchestra who are not students. We have faculty members, staff members, students from other universities, and even folks who have no other association with AU other than the orchestra. They audition just like the students and meet for rehearsals twice a week. It's a great opportunity to expand AU's reach beyond the campus and invite the community to be a part of the arts here.

What can we look forward to from the AU Symphony Orchestra?

For this year, we have a concert coming up in March that is, I guess you could say, Dante-inspired; you know, heaven, hell, and earth. We've got a piece by Christopher Theofanidis, a living composer, called "Rainbow Body" that is all about celestial beings. And we're doing Dvorak's Symphony No. 8, which is a very inspired, earthy piece. We are still deciding on the perfect piece to fill our "hell" section. We are also looking forward to wonderful collaborations with the choral department concerts and the theatre department productions.

The symphony orchestra will perform on November 18–19, 2011, at 8 pm in the Abramson Family Recital Hall at the Katzen Arts Center. Tickets are \$15 for regular admission and \$10 for the AU community and seniors.

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