

Sing Me Back Home

The Richmond Symphony Chorus celebrates 40 years of passion.

BY [ANGELA LEHMAN-RIOS](#)

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Keeping it passionate for four decades: The Richmond Symphony Chorus.

James Erb liked to thunder, "There is no such thing as an easy piece of music" during rehearsals of the Richmond Symphony Chorus, which he directed from its inception in 1971 until his retirement in 2007.

"He probably said that five thousand times in all the years I spent with him," says Nancy Reed, an organist who has sung with the chorus since the beginning.

"Vintage Erb," says Mary Bo Gassman, who was a student of Erb's at the University of Richmond in the 1960s and has sung with the chorus for 20 years.

In December, 1971, after several months of preparation by Erb, the chorus gave its first performance: Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis," under the baton of visiting conductor Robert Shaw. In celebration of its 40th anniversary, the chorus will perform the same work on May 21 and 22 with the Richmond Symphony, conducted by Erin Freeman, the orchestra's associate conductor and also the chorus's current director. Erb, now a member of the chorus, will be singing.

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Sun., May 22, 3 p.m.

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No one would claim this is easy music. In fact, "Missa Solemnis" is one of the toughest works in the classical choral repertoire.

But, Reed and Gassman explain, Erb never talked about actual notes so much as singers' attitudes toward them. "If you want to make something passionate, you have to deal with the difficult problem of complacency," Reed says.

In other words, you can't slack off just because you think the notes are easy.

The Richmond Symphony Chorus is a volunteer ensemble of about 130 members who sing with the Richmond Symphony for five or six concerts every season. Applicants must audition. If accepted, they must commit to the rehearsal schedule and reaudition every three years.

Freeman plans to expand the chorus "incrementally and appropriately" to reach a number that best suits the size of the Carpenter Theatre. At the same time, she wants to program more works for chamber chorus in smaller venues, "to give a little extra challenge to [singers] who need it."

She runs no-slacking-off rehearsals every Tuesday night. Reed describes Freeman's approach as "minutely technical" and very organized. "She doesn't hesitate to absolutely require what she thinks the music needs."

Freeman describes rehearsals as building blocks towards increasingly higher levels of musicianship for the singers. In fact, the purpose of the Richmond Symphony Chorus is not simply to allow the orchestra to perform works that call for a choir, she says, but to influence the musical life of the entire city. Skills that chorus members learn in rehearsal can transfer to their work in church choirs, school music classrooms, private instruction and elsewhere.

In an interview on the sun-lit top floor of CenterStage, Erb, 85, shares memories of the early years of the chorus while Freeman listens. The transition from his 36-year term was made easier for the chorus by his explicit support of her work.

"She knows what she's doing," Erb says. "If she had been a student of mine, I'd be happy to take credit for her."

If Freeman ever becomes complacent, she need only look to the tenor section and see Erb staring earnestly back at her. He never questions her conducting choices, he never complains about the vocal exercises she assigns. But there's still enough of the thunder and lightning in those clear blue eyes to remind her that there's no such thing as an easy piece of music. **S**

The Richmond Symphony and Richmond Symphony Chorus will perform Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis" on May 21 at 8 p.m. and May 22 at 3 p.m. at Richmond CenterStage. For information, visit richmondsymphony.com.

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