



Erin Freeman of Richmond, Va. is the guest conductor for two BPO performances this weekend, Friday, March 8, 2013. She will lead the Pops tribute to the Rat Pack on Saturday and Handel's "Messiah" on Sunday. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)

Candidate to lead BPO Chorus seems to be everywhere

Erin Freeman, a candidate to lead the Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus, seems to be everywhere these days

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There's a new conductor in town.

Erin Freeman holds no official position with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, but suddenly it seems she is everywhere. She is conducting tonight's concert, a tribute to the Rat Pack. Sunday, she is conducting the BPO and the Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus in Handel's "Messiah" at Eastern Hills Wesleyan Church.

The associate conductor of Virginia's Richmond Symphony and the director of its chorus, Freeman is a candidate for the position of director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus. Since June, she has been spending about a week a month here, staying in an apartment lent to her by a BPO patron.

In February, she stepped into the spotlight.

She conducted the BPO for the first time in the pops concert "Wicked Divas." It was a surprise, even to her. She had made plans to work with the chorus that weekend, not conduct.

All that changed when a big Buffalo snowstorm hit, grounding flights. Freeman tells the story on her blog:

Friday, 9 a.m.: The flight to Atlanta actually takes off. On the flight, I review the translation of the Latin text of Mozart Requiem, which I'm conducting next week.

Friday, 11:30 a.m.: Said flight miraculously (I always think it's a miracle!) lands. I turn on my phone right away to let Drew (my husband) know that I am safe. The phone begins lighting up and making all sorts of noises. ... It turns out that Ron Spigelman, the conductor of the Pops show on Saturday night, has a flight scheduled to arrive in Buffalo at midnight, and, well, no one is convinced that's actually going to happen. Would I be willing to cover, if I get into town and he doesn't?

Sure, I say, and then I excitedly share the potential news with my two nice, but slightly confused, row-mates.

Spigelman did not make it in, and Freeman had to go on.

On one hand, it was no big deal. An experienced conductor, she was able to stay calm.

On the other hand – what was she going to wear? She had to head to Banana Republic to buy a suit.

“The woman at Banana Republic kept saying, ‘I’ve got these cute little tapered pants,’ and I’d say, ‘No, no, no!’” she recalls. “Once she grasped what was going on, it was all fine.”

So was the concert, by all accounts. News reviewer Garaud MacTaggart wrote: “Freeman’s conducting was kinetic yet focused, the singers were personable and talented, and the orchestra responded in kind.”

And Freeman found herself a known quantity with the BPO. WNED-FM’s Peter Hall joked about it on the air with her several days ago.

“So Erin, you’re kind of becoming quite the Buffalo Philharmonic pops conductor,” he said. “What’s going on here?”

‘I should be up there’

Freeman, 39, is the latest artist to figure in the ongoing saga of the beleaguered Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus. It has been more than a year since the chorus, in a controversial move, dismissed its director, Doreen Rao. Rao is renowned in the choral world, and many of the chorus’ singers left in protest.

Recently, Rao resurfaced as head of the Buffalo Master Chorale, a new singing group. The Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus, meanwhile, is auditioning three candidates for her former job. One is Roland Martin, who has been serving as the chorus’ interim director. The second is Fredonia tenor Gerald Gray, who led the chorus in “Messiah” in December.

Freeman, the third candidate, entered the picture thanks to her acquaintance with JoAnn Falletta, who besides being music director of the BPO is music director of the Virginia Symphony. They met in Virginia, where they worked together on Mahler’s monumental Eighth Symphony – Falletta conducting, Freeman preparing the chorus.

The soul-searching challenge appears to have bonded them. “Erin is a consummate professional, a great musician and a great deal of fun to have as a friend and colleague,” Falletta says. “We taught a conducting master class together with the Richmond Symphony, and she was wonderful, insightful, caring and filled with good will.”

At Northwestern University, Freeman she earned her bachelor’s degree in vocal performance. Her resume includes singing the part of Susanna in Mozart’s “The Marriage of Figaro,” Maria in “West Side Story,” and “Peter Pan.” (“I flew,” she laughs.)

Gradually, though, she felt drawn toward conducting. Growing up in Atlanta, she idolized Robert Shaw, the choral legend who was also the music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. She was 6 when she heard him conduct the orchestra and banks of singers in the “Dona Nobis Pacem” from Bach’s joyous Mass in B Minor.

“My mom decided she was going to take us to the symphony. I don’t know why. She wasn’t much of a symphony-goer,” she says. “We were in the very back row of Symphony Hall. I remember hearing that Bach, seeing the choir, 200 people in blue robes, thinking, ‘I should be up there. I should be up there.’”

A push from a pianist

The idea of a conducting career seemed strange at first.

“I think as a singer and someone from the South and someone who’s petite and a woman, there’s all kinds of reasons why it would be odd to be a conductor,” Freeman says.

But at Boston University, she finally followed that dream, earning her master’s degree in conducting. She went on to the Peabody Conservatory.

As a conductor, Freeman continues to grow.

Her greatest challenge so far has been Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis," a kind of musical Mount Kilimanjaro.

"I heard it for the first time when I was 18," she laughs. "I walked away going, 'I don't get it.'" That changed. She wound up writing her doctoral dissertation on the masterpiece – and even, to her astonishment, conducting it.

It's a leap from Beethoven to the Rat Pack – and another leap from the Rat Pack to "Messiah." Does Freeman have a problem with that? She says no.

She has worked before with singer Steve Lippia, who sold out Kleinhans two years ago with an all-Sinatra program, and loves his voice. She also likes the arrangements and admires the Rat Pack. "They were great entertainers, but they also had great musicianship and great voices and a variety of styles."

And as for switching from that to "Messiah," she says: "I have to make sure I don't count off, 'One, two, three, four ... Hallelujah!'"

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