



The Rewards of Adventurous Programming

Chorus America/ASCAP Award winners describe their commitment to new music and share strategies for building programs, cultivating audiences, collaborating with composers, and bringing new music to life

BY DON LEE

No risk, no reward. That admonition may make sense to venture capitalists. But for many a music presenter, it pays to play it safe. In music, perhaps more than any other art form, audiences gravitate toward the familiar. And who can argue the value of familiar names like Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms?

As incentive for risk-takers in choral music, Chorus America and ASCAP offer two annual awards. The Award for Adventurous Programming, established in 1992, recognizes member choruses that foster and promote music written in the last 25 years. Every year since 2003, the Alice Parker Award has singled out a member chorus that has expanded its mission by integrating new music into its performances. ►



Recent recipients agree the recognition is meaningful; it tells singers, board members, and audiences that the choral community believes championing new music is important work. But let's dig deeper. Why is the work important? What does it take for it to succeed? What are the real rewards of this risk-taking?

The Commitment to New Music—Altruistic and Personal

For the 2010 and 2011 award-winners surveyed for this story, the commitment to new music stems from impulses both aesthetic and practical, altruistic and personal.

Donald Nally and his 24-member professional ensemble, The Crossing, inclined naturally down that path. They started as a group of friends who got together informally to sing in Philadelphia and Spoleto, Italy. In the course of planning a formal concert in 2005, they realized “modern music was what we loved doing together,” says Nally. Two “enormously successful” concerts confirmed their instincts. Similarly, Jeremy Faust, founding director of the International Orange Chorale of San Francisco, saw his group's future in 2003 at its first concert, when the audience voted a premiere as its favorite piece. Since then, the 34-voice, all-volunteer Chorale has concentrated on 20th- and 21st-century music. “It's the most important thing we do,” says Faust. ▶

Composer Nico Muhly (left), speaking onstage with Julian Wachner, during The Washington Chorus New Music for a New Age concert featuring his music.

Photo: Brian S. Allard

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Working hand-in-glove with composer Morten Lauridsen as his popularity soared in the 1990s, the 130-voice Los Angeles Master Chorale discovered new paths had been opened, says music director Grant Gershon. “Those experiences colored our audience’s appreciation of new music, and that’s what I inherited” from predecessor Paul Salamunovich. The turning point came 15 seasons in for Cantori New York. To mark

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that anniversary, recalls artistic director Mark Shapiro, “a board member said, ‘Let’s do 15 premieres.’ I said, ‘Fantastic.’” He and the 40 volunteer chorus members have continued to explore new and neglected repertoire because, he says, “A big challenge in the internet age is the homogeneity of repertoire and performances. Working in this way lets us pursue an individual path.”

For someone looking for a niche in New York, as Francisco Núñez was in 1997, emphasizing new music can become a branding strategy. After struggling for a decade to raise the profile of the Young People’s Chorus of New York City, he started trying to persuade prominent composers to write for his group. And he succeeded. After he attracted big names such as John Corigliano, Michael Torke, and John Tavener, “other new music ensembles started paying attention,” says Núñez. “They forgot the singers were children and noticed they were artists.”

Núñez also wanted to do more for the kids themselves. (There are hundreds in his program, divided into six choruses.) “The repertoire they’d been singing wasn’t speaking to them,” he says. “It was too innocent.” Echoing his concern, Susan McMane says the San Francisco Girls Chorus commissions special music for the 400 young women who participate because, she points out, “the treble genre is not as full



Composer Kile Smith (right), working with conductor Donald Nally at a rehearsal of his work, *The Waking Sun*, given its world premiere by *The Crossing* last summer.

as the repertoire for mixed chorus.” Tracing that commitment to the group’s beginnings 33 years ago, McMane has made premieres more frequent and more ambitious during her tenure. The 2011–2012 season will be her 11th and last with the Chorus.

For Julian Wachner, music director of the 180-member, all-volunteer Washington Chorus, performing new music “is almost an ethical issue. It fulfills our responsibility to represent our time.” Choral music is well suited to do that, says composer Libby Larsen, who’s worked with three of the 2010 and 2011 award-winners: the San Francisco Girls Chorus, the Los Angeles Master Chorale, and WomenSing. “In dealing with text,” Larsen says, “we’re dealing with the way the culture wants to hear itself expressed—in words and music. The role of the chorus is the same as the role of the bard: singing the soul of our culture.”

As a result, Larsen says, a chorus is inherently more effective than an instrumental ensemble as a showcase for new music. And choral directors tend to agree with her.

Among them is Gershon, who points out that choruses typically have more rehearsal time. “Singers need to be able to hear the music in their heads before it comes out of their mouths,” he says, “so they often have a deeper connection to the material, one that the audience feels very strongly.” Composers feel it too, Gershon says, and apparently so do Pulitzer Prize judges, if David Lang’s 2008 award for *the little match girl passion* is any indication. All of which, Gershon asserts, makes this “an exciting time for the art form. Great composers are rediscovering the voice, writing beautifully for the instrument, and expressing the inexpressible.”

Programming Strategies

To seize this opportunity, to make good on their commitments, these music directors adopt programming strategies that seem to fall into two categories.

Some establish an overarching superstructure and fill in beneath it. With *The Washington Chorus*, winner of the 2011 ▶

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Composers (left to right) Joan Szymko, James Meredith, and Tania Leon with conductor Susan McMane, after the San Francisco Girls Chorus performance of their works, which were commissioned by the Chorus.

Alice Parker Award, Wachner launched an initiative called New Music for a New Age. Since 2009, they have devoted one concert each season to one living composer. Participants so far—Nico Muhly, Trevor Weston, and Elena Ruehr—spent considerable time with the chorus preparing the music. “In the concerts,” says Wachner, “we mix different pieces and different styles to get a snapshot of what the composers are doing.” WomenSing’s project Youth Inspiring Youth brings together young composers with young poets to develop new works in collaboration with the chorus. According to artistic director Martín Benvenuto, the initiative has played a significant role in developing a taste for new music among his singers and his audience. The Young People’s Chorus of New York City launched its Transient Glory concert series in 2001 to showcase the group’s commissions. Since then the project has expanded to include workshops, recordings, and published music.

Other music directors prefer to build each concert from the ground up, starting with a central pillar. For The Crossing, commissions form the building blocks. “We look several years ahead at what we’re going to be doing,” says Nally. In working with composers, he admits to being particular about text, length, instrumentation, and deadline, aiming to make sure that “the singers can dig in and find it worthwhile and the audience can engage.” Shapiro’s strategy depends on serendipity. When programming for Cantori New York or the Monmouth Civic Chorus



Composer Libby Larsen (second from left) discusses score changes with student composer Lauren McLaren, while conductor Martín Benvenuto (center) works with Sarah Downs and Bruce Lengacher, directors of the high school choirs collaborating with WomenSing in their 2011 Youth Inspiring Youth Composers’ Workshop.

(which won the Alice Parker Award in 2008), he says, “I talk to colleagues, I try to be attuned to the world and know as much repertoire as I can in order to find that one gem.” The gems inspire themes around which Shapiro and like-minded music directors design entire concerts or even seasons. Sometimes the process works in reverse. For a 2010 program featuring American immigrant composers—Stravinsky, Weill, Krenek—McMane realized she had no music representing a recent immigrant. So she turned to Chen Yi, who composed *Angel Island Passages*, a three-movement piece about Chinese immigration.

When it comes to tactics for presenting new music, almost all of these directors agree on one thing: Talk to the audience. But don’t let it sound like a lecture. Most often, they offer pre-concert conversations or a few informal words right before a new piece. Benvenuto has gone a step or two further in concerts with his Palo Alto-based group, the Peninsula Women’s

Chorus (winner of the 1999 and 2003 Adventurous Programming Awards). To help the audience appreciate the development of a simple melody in a piece by Estonian composer Veljo Tormis, he led them in a sing-along. To demonstrate how the title “Snowforms” played out in R. Murray Schafer’s printed score, he produced a PowerPoint presentation. “The audience has two or three minutes to read the notes for a new piece and then they’re supposed to like it,” says Benvenuto. “We need to help them bridge the gap between what they know and what we know.”

Cultivate an Audience

Although they hear occasional grumbling about some of the new pieces they perform, none of these directors has had to face a chorus of audience complaints. The explanation is simple: They know their audiences.

Some have followers who appreciate a balance between old and new, familiar and unfamiliar. That’s especially true for the ►

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–Zane Fiala

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Alice Parker Award winners, including the 2010 honoree, WomenSing. Benvenuto says the group adopted a new performance mission several years ago, aiming to explore “the traditional and the unexpected.” The 45-member volunteer ensemble’s audience is “well rooted in tradition,” he says, “but over time we’ve whetted their appetite for something else.” As assistant conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic under music

director Esa-Pekka Salonen, Gershon saw firsthand how effective a balanced approach can be. Acting on that, he’s tried to make the Los Angeles Master Chorale “a one-stop shop for choral music in L.A.” In the coming season he plans to pair a Bach motet with the David Lang *passion*, anticipating that “the clear musical links” between the pieces “will illuminate both kinds of music in a meaningful way.”

Some of these choruses target new music fans almost exclusively. In Nally’s ▶

LESSONS IN ADVENTUROUS PROGRAMMING

For the benefit of colleagues who want to make a stab at more adventurous programming, what advice would these musicians offer? Of all their experiences with new music, what works and what doesn’t? Here are some of the key lessons they’ve learned.

“Everyone’s busy. You have to get on the composer’s schedule very early. You need to be able to ask the composer questions and work through the difficult parts. You need enough time to learn the piece. (Our chorus has to memorize it.) You need to build in lag time so you don’t get caught if there are late arrivals.” –Susan McMane, artistic director, San Francisco Girls Chorus

“In my collaborations with choruses, the through-line is text. One of the first things we need to talk about is, what kind of text are we interested in? In dealing with text, we’re dealing with the way the culture wants to hear itself expressed—in words and music. Next we have to ask, is it settable? Does it have an inherent musical quality? Can it carry a musical phrase? Can a musical phrase carry it? The conversation is not about the need for an uplifting, cheery piece; the questions form around what we’re trying to say and why we’re trying to say it.” –Libby Larsen, composer

“Be true to the audience all the time. Know what they honor and value. Never play to the lowest common denominator. Sometimes that means you have to ask the composer to reconsider something or you have to decide not to do the piece. Truth and honesty with the audience and with the composer is the best route.” –Donald Nally, conductor, The Crossing



Conductor Mark Shapiro directs Cantori New York in a performance with marimbist Makoto Nakura, who was involved in one of the ensemble’s commission projects.

“Many composers are also singers. We have a lot of success with them. Some composers are not constrained by any of that; they write what they hear in their heads. So we look at the score and see if it has real singers in mind.” –Jeremy Faust, founding director, International Orange Chorale of San Francisco

“Just because a piece is hard doesn’t mean it’s good. You always need to get through the complexity and find the germ of poetry or the musical idea that takes you on a journey.” –Zane Fiala, artistic director, International Orange Chorale of San Francisco

“Budgeting rehearsal time is key to success in programming any music, but especially new music. You must present new pieces with total confidence so the performance is at the highest level of artistry you can achieve.” –Grant Gershon, music director, Los Angeles Master Chorale

“You can’t program out of fear. You can’t allow negative reaction to be a reason not to do a piece. That’s going to happen; not every piece is a masterwork.” –Francisco Núñez, artistic director, Young People’s Chorus of New York City

“Short, audience-friendly introductions, explanations of the context, are very helpful. With a piece that’s unusual for a traditional audience, leaving it on its own is a dangerous thing, especially if you want to create a taste for more. People react strongly to music. If you offer them some way to understand, then there’s a chance the response will be at least, “I appreciate what they’re trying to do.” –Martín Benvenuto, artistic director, WomenSing

“New music has made me a much better interpreter of standard repertoire. When I look at everything through the lens of new music, I have my fingertips on what’s fresh—what the composers were doing to respond to their time. We learn to ask questions that make us better interpreters and better rehearsalers.” –Mark Shapiro, artistic director, Cantori New York

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opinion, “the audience for the Mozart *Requiem* is not interested in what we do.” Like many of his colleagues, Faust takes it as an article of faith that the International Orange Chorale’s audience comes with “an open mind and open ears.” Chorale music director Zane Fiala chimes in, “The passion the singers have is what sells it. They own the new pieces; they’re *our* pieces.” Nally experiences the same thing in Philadelphia: “The musicians are taking risks, revealing a musical and emotional vulnerability, and the audience responds in a very visceral way.”

Most important to cultivating new music audiences, says Shapiro, is a determination not to succumb to pressure in the short term. “It’s about working toward a long-term commitment to the art form,” he says. “If you think of your work as part of a continuum, then it becomes easier for you to present new music and for the audience to metabolize it.”

That does not mean all the rewards reside in a distant new-music heaven. Nor is an immediate measure, “the number of people that come in the door,” a true sign of success, says Nally. “It’s whether the artists are fulfilled in what they’re doing.”

Bring New Music to Life

Without exception, the music directors surveyed for this story became most impassioned when they talked about the creative ferment of bringing a new piece to life, especially when it involves the singers in direct collaboration with composers.



Composer Louis Andriessen (left) with conductor Grant Gershon following the Los Angeles Master Chorale’s world premiere performance of “*The City of Dis or: The Ship of Fools*,” from *La Commedia*, an opera based on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

Even before she started writing her 2008 commission *Womanly Song of God*, Larsen led a workshop for members of the San Francisco Girls Chorus to see what kinds of rhythms and harmonies they responded to. “It was wonderful and enriching,” says McMane. “She got to know what they were capable of.” For Larsen, “knowing why the chorus exists” is at the heart of a collaboration: “knowing what it means to love to sing in relation to the chorus, understanding what the chorus likes to say, and understanding the chorus’s skills and abilities.” Knowing all of that, she says, she can get her own ego out of the way, allowing the singers to make the music theirs.

Núñez appreciates the sentiment. “The most beautiful thing about premieres,” he says, “is that we create the first performance

practice.” When Wachner begins work on a brand-new piece, here’s what he tells The Washington Chorus: “Let’s figure out why the composer is writing these notes at this time.” Along the way, he says, “we increase the sophistication level of the singers.” Some of his colleagues have observed their singers learn best when they witness the composer tackling a compositional problem—finding a more effective way to highlight a text or divide the parts, for example. When he works with composers, Gershon sometimes brings up “niggling” notation issues because he’s found they can make a big difference in rehearsal.

Experiencing all of this, singers not only become more sophisticated, they can also become more opinionated. When chorus members complain about a new piece, Benvenuto preaches patience. “Not everything delights us at first sight,” he reminds them. “Often fine things take a while to unveil themselves and to become appreciated. I am constantly humbled by what a piece can do in performance.” ■

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Composers and collaborators in the Young People’s Chorus of New York City’s *Transient Glory* commissioning program (left to right): David Sawyer, choreographer Stephen Petronio, Bobby Previte, David Sawyer’s father, Thea Musgrave, John Corigliano, Mark Adamo, Francisco Núñez, and Derek Bermel in the front.



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