

Understanding what a choir needs

Introducing Jean-Sébastien Vallée

DAVID PERLMAN



THAM LAN TRUONG

I recently connected, twice, with the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir's recently appointed artistic director, Jean-Sébastien Vallée (the eighth conductor in the choir's 127-year history). The first time was on September 20, when I visited a TMC rehearsal; the second on October 4, for a chat in *The WholeNote* office. Both visits were on Mondays, because, at time of writing anyway, Mondays are Vallée's only Toronto day. In a typical week, both his choral and his environmental footprint grow – flying between home-base Montreal (where he is music director of the renowned Choir of the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul, and teaches at McGill's Schulich School of Music), Ottawa (where he conducts the all-amateur Ottawa Choral Society), and now Toronto.

September 20 (Election Day)

"Turn left to vote, right to sing" said the friendly greeter, seated in the little lobby area that links the sanctuary at Yorkminster Park Baptist Church with the adjoining community hall.

I'd already voted, so I dutifully turned right, not in the expectation of doing much singing, but to observe Vallée putting the choir through its paces in preparation for *Coming to Carry Me Home*, their November 2 season-opening concert. It was the first rehearsal at which actually rehearsing took priority over things like handing out scores and all the other seasonal business that goes with a large choir creaking back to life.

After presenting proof of full vaccination, I sat in the side pews, adjacent to the basses, armed with scores at hand for both works being rehearsed, but having declined Vallée's invitation to join in if I liked. That being said, the energy over the course of the close-to-three-hour rehearsal was contagious, and from time to time I found myself rumbling along.

The two works being rehearsed, with all choristers masked, were Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem* and Nathaniel Dett's *The Chariot Jubilee*. At this particular rehearsal it was the Brahms that received the lion's share of attention, which worked well for me, because the work is a member-in-good-standing of the "great classical master-works of the world" fraternity, and therefore familiar to both choir and conductor. So the rehearsal was a more nuanced affair than grappling with a new piece for the first time would likely have been -- and

therefore more of an opportunity to get some early hints of the things Vallée cares about most as a conductor.

Passion anchored in practicality would be one way to describe what I saw and heard: an insistence on clarity of articulation and phrasing so the music always serves the work's narrative arc. Patient iterative work with a clear emotional goal always in mind.

There were some particularly nice moments: "*Brahms is a genius, my friends, but here he has some problems*" (Vallée says, stopping the choir in mid-measure). He then gets the whole choir to sing the problematic passage in unison, after which the three sections not usually singing that line have a much clearer idea of what it is that they have a responsibility not to overpower. Another nice moment, during a devilishly long passage: "*Let's talk about the difference between individual and common breathing. The one is part of the music, the other is not. In theory, a choir could actually sing forever without having any breath that the audience hears.*"

And my favourite moment (stopping things mid-stream again): "*A general rule, please: never make the highest note your most important.*" (I've been going through my mental rolodex of anthems ever since, to test that one!)

October 4

Two Mondays later, mid-afternoon, we met up again, this time to talk. He came straight to *The WholeNote* office from the airport, with a plan that someone would pick him up from here to take him for a quick meal before the evening's rehearsal. (It must have been a very quick bite, because we rambled on for a lot longer than we had planned.)

In an ideal world, this is where I would say that you can find the longer version of the conversation on our website. And it may still happen. But I don't advise holding your breath (individually or in common) in the meanwhile.

Here's just a taste.

On his busy schedule:

They say if you want something done well, give it to a busy person, but even so, isn't this pushing it?

Maybe so. I started in August, thinking through how to make it all happen. So I'll be doing all the special projects and concerts [at St. Andrew-St. Paul] this year. But none of the Sunday services ... so now I can travel on Sundays! I've been working as a church musician since age 16. I figure it could be time to be able to travel or just have brunch. So this is my last year with them. Right now I leave [Toronto] right after rehearsal, take the 11pm flight back to Montreal and usually teach at 9:30 in Montreal on Tuesdays, but I may try to move my teaching schedule. That way once we've got longer stretches here – Monday and Wednesday rehearsals – I will stay longer.

But Ottawa Choral Society is also Wednesdays, right?

Usually, but on a flexible schedule, with three concerts to prepare. And I have a really good associate that we just hired who's covering most of the rehearsals. So it will become a bit more under control. Not last week though! Monday was here, Tuesday in Montreal, Wednesday in Ottawa. And back again. We don't get bored.

On team building:

Speaking of artistic associates, at TMC there will be three of you, right? You, Simon Rivard [also RBC Resident Conductor with the TSO and conductor of the TSYO] as associate conductor, and Irene Gregorio as collaborative pianist. How will it work?

I'm doing three of the four concerts, with Simon co-conducting *Festival of Carols* in December, and also playing a role in *Endangered* in May with me. And in between he's fully taking on *Sacred Music for a Sacred Space* in April, along with Brainerd Blyden-Taylor of the Nathaniel Dett Chorale.

And Irene Gregorio? You worked with her at the University of Southern California, right?

Worked together, yes, and were colleagues and friends.

Is that how she came on board?

We had a real search process ... close to 18 applications, of which we shortlisted 10 or 12. Auditions, I made sure she knew about that because of what I remembered of her. I had moved back to Canada in 2015 so it had been six, seven years, but I had such a great memory of my time with her. Not just as a wonderful pianist, but someone really good at understanding what a choir needs – not just the music, but also how you work with people in this kind of context. That's something that needs to come from every member in the team. So, you know, I made sure she knew.

On the TMC's home-page mission statement:

The mission statement on the TMC website says three things: the TMC is "one of Canada's largest choral organizations"; its role is to "provide Canadian audiences the experience of the classical choral masterworks of the world"; and that "grand symphonic sound has been the TMC's trademark for 125 years." How do you honour all that but still find room to do things differently?

That's the challenge for every large choral group, especially one that's been in the field of music for as long as TMC. Yes there's [a core canon] of masterworks, some less well known than the Brahms *Requiem*. How do we renew our mission and still honour that? It's much easier when I'm working with a chamber choir. Twenty voices is a much more flexible medium for commissioning and taking on newer works.

Part of the answer is what we're doing with this first concert: to look at the time-tested Masterworks, but in a way that is a bit newer, mostly by matching them up in the same program with other works that do not meet that "official" criterion. That way we shed new light on each of these works, taken together. But clearly the definition of Masterworks is itself problematic – not insofar as questioning the quality of the works – I would never dare question the value of work by Brahms or Bach – but in how that leads to overlooking other works. That's why I'm also hoping, in the seasons to come, to revitalize the role of the professional core of TMC – it used to be the Elora Singers in that role.

And it was called the Chamber Choir before that?

The chamber choir, exactly. But whatever we decide to call it, that group will be able to do more things on their own, not to shine independently but to contribute to the organization's larger goals – taking on repertoire that shines in its own right but also turns around the way we view the so-called larger Masterworks.

And in every area – organizational, recruitment, community engagement, repertoire, sound, working with other choirs – there are things that we can turn around this way, given time.

Seven conductors in 127 years is an average of 18 years each. Time shouldn't be a problem. ●

David Perlman can be reached at publisher@thewholenote.com

Glionna Mansell Presents

ORGANIX
21
A Music Series unlike any other
www.organixconcerts.ca

Lunch Time Concerts
12:30 - 1:30 pm

Free-will Offering (suggested \$20 Donation)

NOVEMBER 17TH Imre Olah
Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic, 3055 Bloor Street West - Toronto

NOVEMBER 24TH Matthew Larkin
All Saints Anglican Church, 2850 Bloor Street West - Toronto

DECEMBER 8TH Imre Olah
All Saints Anglican Church, 2850 Bloor Street West - Toronto

DECEMBER 15TH Hanné Becker
Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic, 3055 Bloor Street West - Toronto

DECEMBER 22ND David Alexander Simon
All Saints Anglican Church, 2850 Bloor Street West - Toronto

SPECIAL PRESENTATION SERIES
Wed. June 29 2022, 7:30 pm
Sophie-Véronique Cauchefer-Choplin
Timothy Eaton Memorial Church
230 St. Clair Ave. West - Toronto
General Admission: \$ 45.00

Tickets and Information: organixconcerts.ca
416-769-5224 Mobile Call/Text: 416-571-3680

TORONTO CLASSICAL SINGERS
JURGEN PETRENKO, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR


**WE'RE STAGING
A COMEBACK!**

30

**AND JUST IN TIME FOR OUR 30TH
ANNIVERSARY OF THE FINEST CHORAL MUSIC**

March 6, 2022 Mozart's Requiem
May 1, 2022 – 30th Anniversary Concert
featuring Handel.

torontoclassicalsingers.ca


transcending tradition