

Your Neighbor

The New York Virtuoso Singers, led by conductor Harold Rosenbaum

PHOTOS COURTESY OF HAROLD ROSENBAUM



South Salem's choral music maestro Critically acclaimed conductor devotes career to artistic excellence

BY JESSICA JAFET
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said that “the human voice is the organ of the soul.” Choral conductor Harold Rosenbaum has channeled that sentiment into his art form, which is his passion and his livelihood.

“I think the human voice is the most expressive instrument,” Rosenbaum said. “It’s the soul speaking through tones—the innermost feelings being portrayed through pitches.”

The silver-haired conductor has lived in South Salem for 30 years and has served as the organist and choir director at the South Salem Presbyterian Church. He has also diligently carved a name for himself as a foremost interpreter of choral music.

He is the founder of an elite volunteer choir, The Canticum Novum Singers, which began in 1973, as well as a professional choir, The New York Virtuoso Singers, which was formed in 1988. He leads both groups in performing world-class productions, ranging from classical to contemporary compositions, in New York, Europe and venues around the world.

Rosenbaum, who grew up in the Bronx and Queens, considered himself a “pop piano player” in his younger years and sang in choirs as a child. He said his musical

leanings at the time included Peter, Paul and Mary, Judy Collins and Joni Mitchell. But after attending Queens College as a voice major and then completing a master’s degree in choral conducting, he found his calling.

“I’ve conducted every conceivable kind of choir you can imagine,” Rosenbaum explained. “A senior adult choir, youth choirs, synagogue choirs, church choirs—the love and enthusiasm for choral music has been there for hundreds of years—and every style of music has been set to choirs: classical, pop music, jazz, show tunes, spiritual and more, either arranged or composed.”

In his almost five decades-long career, Rosenbaum has conducted more than 1,700 concerts and has led American choirs on 31 international tours. In receiving Columbia University’s Ditson Conductor’s Award in 2014, Rosenbaum joined the company of James Levine, Leonard Bernstein and Lukas Foss, among other exceptional conductors.

“To sit and study a score is a blessing. To be on the stage, conducting, is a joy and a blessing, just making music and communicating with the audience,” he said. “There is nothing like it, absolutely nothing like it. When I’m running a rehearsal and I’m on stage feeling the music, I’m feeling the power of the music, and I am accessing

what I think is the composer’s intentions, and I’m focusing on the details, I feel at home, I feel at peace.”

With his wife Edie, a singer and choir director, the Rosenbaums are providing aspiring young singers in the area with an opportunity to sing masterworks on a professional level, through The Canticum Novum Youth Choir started by Edie Rosenbaum in 2001. These talented student musicians practice weekly, learn to appreciate classical music and are invited to perform with Harold Rosenbaum’s other choirs.

Rosenbaum has collaborated with hundreds of notable contemporary composers, renowned orchestras and opera companies, and conducts a vast and diverse repertoire of works. But he says his heart holds a special place for classical music and admits to a special fondness for Johann Sebastian Bach.

“When I’m conducting Bach, I’m totally transported, spiritually,” he said. “If I’m listening to Beethoven, I’m totally blown away and amazed because he’s such an innovator and such a giant. But I’m not necessarily transported in the same way as I am with Bach.”

The maestro continued: “If you want to cry, you listen to Mahler. If someone is cutting you off on the road while you are driving when you are listening to Beethoven, then you might get a little aggressive in re-

turn. If you are listening to Bach, you might just give the peace symbol and just forget about it.”

In addition to conducting, the award-winning musician has taught at SUNY Buffalo, The Juilliard School, Queens College and Adelphi University; authored “A Practical Guide to Choral Conducting,” and has created an eponymous choral conducting institute.

As a champion of gifted composers, ranging from traditional to modern, Rosenbaum feels he has an important purpose in his line of work. “When I am conducting, I feel like I am carrying out a mission of bringing the past into the present—I’m hoping to inspire people, to lift people’s spirits, to make people happy in a powerful and artistic way,” he said. “I want to help people experience the joy and passion we all deserve.”

Here in Katonah-Lewisboro, Rosenbaum is devoted to his role as music director at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Katonah. Music-lovers are invited to experience a performance by The Canticum Novum Singers at 3 p.m. Sunday, April 22, at the church. Admission is \$20 (\$10 for students). And on Sunday, April 29, all are welcome to join a sing-along of Handel’s Messiah, also at St. Luke’s in Katonah.



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