

Honoring the 'Uphill Battle' of a Champion of New Choral Music

By Roberta Hershenson, The New York Times, June 22, 2008

The conductor Harold Rosenbaum, recent recipient of the Laurel Leaf Award from the American Composers Alliance, sees choral composers today as a neglected species. Avocational or school choruses, which account for most choruses in the United States, are reluctant to tackle music they fear will be overly complex, he says. Music publishers fear contemporary works will be too atonal to sell. But Mr. Rosenbaum has made it his mission to open resistant minds and ears. "There's so much wonderful contemporary choral music out there," he said. "Composers are very frustrated."

So it was not surprising that when Mr. Rosenbaum received his award in Manhattan on June 4 – presented in recognition of "distinguished achievement in fostering and encouraging the performance of new American works" – he deferred to composers themselves in his acceptance speech. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for gifted composers around the country," he said from the stage. "I wouldn't be here tonight if it weren't for their unbelievable talent and passion for the music of our time."

Mr. Rosenbaum, who lives in South Salem, joins a prestigious list of previous winners of the award, which has been given yearly since 1951. These include the Juilliard String Quartet and noted symphony conductors like Leonard Slatkin, Leopold Stokowski and George Szell. After the award ceremony, which was held after intermission during a concert of new music that Mr. Rosenbaum conducted, he asked, with a smile, to be allowed to "get back to work." Then he led the New York Virtuoso Singers, a professional chorus he founded 20 years ago, in works by Louis Karchin, John Eaton and Steven R.

Gerber, among others. Many of the composers on the program were in the audience.

After a rehearsal with the New York Virtuoso Singers a week earlier, Mr. Rosenbaum said he hoped the award, with its highlight on American music, would help build interest in music written today. "Maybe people will be more curious about this body of work, most of which is lying dormant," he said. "Every time I'm onstage conducting great music, it makes up for the struggle." He referred several times to the "uphill battle" he and other orchestral conductors face in championing new works.

At 58, with gray shoulder-length hair that neatly skims the back of his tuxedo, Mr. Rosenbaum seems to be thriving on his efforts. At any one time, he said, he is working on 15 to 20 projects involving one of his seven choruses. These include the 35-year-old Canticum Novum Singers, which performs music from Bach to Schnittke, and two choruses at the University of Buffalo, where, as a full-time faculty member, he spends one and a half days each week. Composers constantly send him new works; he has received nearly 3,000 scores during the past 20 years, he said, and has performed about 100 of them. Mr. Rosenbaum also edits a choral series established in his name by G. Schirmer, the music publisher. After the interview, he said, he was returning home to study an opera score by Marie Barker Nelson, one of Hindemith's students, that he plans to conduct in 2010.