Washington Chorus is in the market for another music director

By Anne Midgette
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Christopher Bell will step down for family reasons when his three-year contract ends in 2020.

(Shannon Finney)

The drill is starting to feel familiar: The Washington Chorus announced Tuesday that Christopher Bell, who started as music director in 2017, will step down at the end of his three-year contract in June 2020.

Bell, who is from Northern Ireland, said he is leaving for personal reasons. “The death of my father at the end of 2017 requires me to focus more on family

The Washington Chorus
Washington Post: “Washington Chorus is in the market for another music director”

and personal matters, things that I cannot do based full time in Washington,” he said in a statement.

Bell’s tenure seemed like it was just getting started. He arrived from Europe with a high-profile résumé and the promise of focusing on core choral values. In the two years Bell has been in Washington, the chorus has performed a few times with the National Symphony Orchestra (including the recent world premiere of “Arctica” by Lera Auerbach) and offered, among other things, an abridged concert version of “Carmen” and a St. Patrick’s Day celebration.

The chorus has seen more transition than it expected, with both a new music director and new executive director unexpectedly leaving. In February, Stephen Marc Beaudoin, formerly executive director of the Maryland Symphony Orchestra, assumed the post of executive director, replacing interim executive director Rita Shapiro, who was pinch-hitting after the unexpected departure of Chase Maggiano, himself a new executive director who, in 2016, had replaced the chorus’s longtime top administrator, Dianne Peterson. Like Bell, Maggiano left the post for personal reasons.

Beaudoin, originally trained as a singer, said that coming to the Washington Chorus was “like a homecoming” after a career spent largely in the nonprofit world. He is committed, he said, to making sure that “underrepresented composers are part of our future.”

As for Bell’s successor, Beaudoin said last week that a search committee had been formed and that the chorus hoped to name a new music director by December.
Given that two other major choruses in Washington, the Cathedral Choral Society and the Washington Bach Consort, have new music directors this season, Washington is getting a lot of experience with new choral blood.

First, though, comes the announcement of what will be Bell’s final season, the 2019-20 season, expected soon. Bell will also lead the chorus in the final concert of this season, a program of the Duruflé Requiem and James MacMillan’s “Cantos Sagrados,” on June 9.