Conductor David Hoose turns toward the next movement

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David Hoose believes that, on its face, choral music can be difficult to love.

It’s an unexpected sentiment from the conductor of Cantata Singers, one of the city’s most treasured ensembles, but Hoose has his reasons: The sound of a chorus doesn’t
have as much coloristic glamour or layered complexity as the sound of an orchestra; at a choral concert, there is nothing to watch — no bows dancing in unison or percussion vividly struck; there are none of the dramatic plots or the costumes found in opera; and in many choral works, you can’t even understand the words well enough to appreciate the subtlety of their relationship to the music.

He’s not wrong in any of these observations. And yet despite them all, Hoose himself, over the course of 38 seasons at the helm of Cantata Singers, has made the most persuasive case imaginable for choral music belonging not at the periphery but near the very center of a city’s musical identity. He has done so through the consistent excellence of the ensemble’s performances, through his intelligent programming that places music in dialogue across the centuries, through his devotion to commissioning vibrant new works of choral music while continuing to care for the chorus’s roots in the music of Bach, and ultimately, through his core commitment to a vision of the choral repertoire as providing an endless variety of musical expression that demands the most of both performers and listeners.

In recent months, this legacy has been placed in sharp relief as Hoose approaches the end of his tenure with Cantata Singers. Before it was scuttled by the pandemic, the current 2020-21 season was to be his grand finale. (In its stead, he will conduct one final concert at a date still to be determined.) With or without a celebratory final season, however, the appreciation from the city’s musical community has been abundant and heartfelt.
“He’s simply one of the finest musicians I’ve ever had the pleasure and privilege to work with,” says Mark Cleveland, a bass-baritone, voice teacher, and longstanding chorus member. “And his ability to bring us, through the rehearsal process, to a place that enables us to express in the moment of performance some of the most intimate human emotions — it’s just infallible.”

Lynn Nowels, a cellist who has performed with the Cantata Singers ensemble for decades, concurs. “He’s an absolute treasure,” she says. “What he’s doing is always about the music, it’s never about him.”

Unfortunately, the smoothness of Hoose’s retirement has not been commensurate with the acclaim he has earned for himself and the chorus. Last year, a letter signed by more than 80 members of the city’s musical community criticized the Cantata Singers board.
for determining the timing of Hoose’s own retirement, despite his three decades of service to the organization. And in June, a second letter, signed by 39 choristers, requested that Hoose’s tenure be extended by one additional year in order to allow the aborted farewell programs to be rescheduled for the 2021-22 season. Such a move, they wrote, would allow singers, instrumentalists, and the listening public the opportunity to support and honor Hoose’s achievements, and it would also help the group regain stability after the disruption of the pandemic. The board, according to those familiar with the matter, has declined this request.

When asked about the situation by e-mail, Cantata Singers board chair (and chorus member) Christine Swistro wrote, “With regard to setting the timing of David’s retirement, in July 2019 the Board of Directors and David negotiated and signed a two-year contract setting June 2021 as the date of David’s retirement from Cantata Singers.”

She added: “Unfortunately, the pandemic has changed everything. ...The loss of the spring 2020 concerts, the full 2020-21 season, and uncertainty about the future, represent a significant financial loss. The board is deeply grateful for David’s years of artistry and service not just to Cantata Singers but to the world of classical music. We are heartbroken that the farewell season planned for him could not be realized due to the pandemic...”

For his part, Hoose seems eager to steer clear of any discord generated by decisions past and to focus instead on the music. In fact, when the conductor recently spoke with the Globe over Zoom from his Lexington home, he quickly explained that “focusing on the music” was not just a coping strategy for the present situation but in fact one of the core distinguishing characteristics of Cantata Singers itself.

“There are organizations that form themselves because they want to be a string quartet, or they want to make a chorus, or they want a chamber orchestra,” says Hoose. “Those are perfectly legitimate and good reasons to create an ensemble. But Cantata Singers started because these young college students wanted to explore the cantatas of Bach.”
That was back on one fall evening in 1964, when a group of some two dozen singers arrived at the Hale Chapel of First Church in Boston and gathered in a semicircle around the ensemble’s founding conductor Leo Collins. Their agenda was clear: to perform Bach’s Cantatas, and in the case of the very first meeting, Nos. 72 and 131.

From its outset, in other words, Cantata Singers was an instrument assembled to realize a musical end — and an ambitious one at that. As a body of work, Bach’s Cantatas were far
Conductor David Hoose turns toward the next movement — and an ambitious one at that. As a body of work, Bach’s Cantatas were far less well-known at the time. In an account of the chorus’s history written for its 50th anniversary, Hoose elaborated: “I think [the chorus’s founders] saw the possibility of confronting a great spiritual and artistic mind as he dealt with the struggles of his own time, challenges no different from theirs, or from ours. ... Joy and sorrow, fear and courage, pride and humility persist. The heart doesn’t change. These folks came to listen to Bach ... as if the ink were still wet on the page.”

Over the years, the best Cantata Singers performances have preserved that sense of a living, breathing repertoire, music of the past that pulses with the freshness of the contemporary. It’s a vibrancy that Hoose, who is trained as a composer, achieves through a famously demanding rehearsal process that often focuses in with laser-like intensity on the music’s smaller details in service of the larger expressive whole. And these details extend not just to the vocal lines. When she began playing with the group, Nowels, the cellist, recalls being astonished by the detail with which Hoose personally marked up each individual orchestral part in order to specify his vision for nuances of dynamics and phrasing.

At the same time, across the decades, the notion of the ink being still wet on the page has often applied to far more music than just Bach. While tending to the chorus’s roots in the Baroque, Hoose has also greatly expanded its reach to encompass not only 19th- and 20th-century masters but actual contemporary music. On his watch, the chorus has commissioned no less than 16 works from composers such as John Harbison (whose Cantata Singers-commissioned “Flight Into Egypt” won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize), Yehudi Wyner, Stephen Hartke, Andy Vores, James Primosch, Elena Ruehr, and Donald Sur. (The group’s record of commissions has been documented in an exemplary seven-disc box set released in 2018.)

“It’s an amazing achievement to think of one group putting out such major efforts on the commissioning side,” says Harbison. “That’s one of the things that David and Cantata Singers have maintained throughout — a kind of idealism that is connected to a real zeal for developing and sharing music.”
which one feels when the group walks on stage. They are totally behind every note they sing.”

The chorus maintains a roster of roughly 60 singers, though individual programs often involve a smaller group of some 44 core members. The soloists and union orchestra are paid, and the singers themselves volunteer their time, some of them driving long distances for weekly Wednesday night rehearsals. Approximately half of the core 44 singers, Hoose estimates, make their livings in music, whether as conductors, pianists, or church musicians. And about 10 among this group are professional singers who also perform with other choruses around Boston. Overall, the membership spans generations but the vast majority of choristers have sung with the group for many years.

That loyalty from the chorus’s membership has been matched over time by an unusually sustained commitment from Boston audiences. At Cantata Singers performances, you can often feel this commitment in the sheer quality of the listening, which can sometimes seem more intense than at a typical concert. “Their audience really comes to listen, and to listen hard,” the critic Richard Buell once wrote.

And occasionally members of the audience do more than listen hard. Hoose recalls once performing a Bach motet whose scoring included a part for litui, the mysterious and long-forgotten horns from Bach’s day. Just as Hoose was about to give his downbeat, one listener, apparently armed with historical knowledge from a close reading of the program note, shouted into the quiet hall, “Where are the litui!”
Hoose grew up in Charlottesville, Va., as the son of a high school band director. French horn was his primary instrument but at Oberlin Conservatory he found himself drawn to the more abstract challenges of composition and music theory. After graduating he came to the Boston area to study composition at Brandeis, arriving in 1969. But just as he was starting up his program, he was drafted. Hoose then spent 3½ years playing horn in the US Marine Band in Washington, D.C. Returning to Boston having reembraced his horn, he then cofounded the Emmanuel Wind Quintet, alongside Christopher Krueger (flute),
Peggy Pearson (oboe), Bruce Creditor (clarinet), and Philip Long (bassoon).

“For many years in Boston, David was the sovereign horn player,” recalls Harbison, “even including the great people who played in the Boston Symphony.” Over its 10 years of existence, the Emmanuel Wind Quintet became a storied local ensemble, enjoyed outsize success well beyond Boston, and won the prestigious Naumburg prize. Meanwhile, Hoose had become increasingly interested in conducting local groups. After three guest appearances with Cantata Singers, he was asked to be its music director, succeeding Harbison himself, and the rest is history. (Along the way, Hoose also taught for 29 years at Boston University; served for 11 seasons as music director of the Tallahassee Symphony; and directed Collage New Music for 27 years, a role he is continuing.)

While at the helm of the chorus, in addition to the music of Bach, Hoose championed lesser known voices such as Heinrich Schütz and Jan Zelenka. In recent memory, the chorus devoted full seasons to exploring individual composers including Kurt Weill and Benjamin Britten, and in so doing, provided some of the most richly contextualized programming heard locally in many years.

Looking ahead, Hoose says he will miss aspects of his typical routine for score study as well as the excitement of new commissions. But most of all, he says, “it’s the people I will miss.” As a whole, he explains, the choristers “bring a level of engagement that is really profound and inspiring.”

Circling back to his original description of choral music’s difficulty, the very challenges cited by Hoose can in fact be turned on their heads to point toward a profound attraction of the genre. With no instruments, no costumes, no dramatic plots, the singers gathered on stage often have little to outwardly distinguish them from those seated on the other side of the footlights, a semicircle meeting its mirror image. In the nature of its presentation, one might then say, choral music speaks in the most basic terms to the shared humanity and mutually sustaining connection between a community of performers and a community of listeners, joined together by the power of their
engagement with the music over time.

For 36 years, Hoose has been forging these two communities into an organic whole, one that is not only greater than the sum of its parts but also one that embodies many of the very best qualities of Boston as a city of music. That city, that completed circle of musicians and listeners, simply put, owes David Hoose our thanks.

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