



## essay

### *The Chorus Master Speaks*

by Kathy Saltzman Romey

Often I'm asked, directly or indirectly, to explain just what it is I do when preparing the Minnesota Chorale for performances with the Minnesota Orchestra. Of the many forms this question takes, my favorite is, "Why were you up there taking a bow?"

I don't take offense at this. I know that my work as chorus master is hidden from the audience, as is the extraordinary diligence of the Chorale's singers in rehearsing, say, Brahms' *German Requiem* for concert. But I also know that when voices merge with instruments on the stage of Orchestra Hall, and when text is married to music, magic can occur. Our job, mine and the singers', is to make that magic happen dependably. Driven by a passion for the choral art, we aim to create moments of transcendent beauty to share with both listeners and fellow performers.

For every major performance project, I build a distinctive choral instrument, drawing from the Chorale's roster of 260 singers a group of the appropriate size with the needed skills: vocal color and technique, linguistic capability, musical experience and leadership, esprit de corps. (A chorus that's right for Brahms won't be right for Handel, and vice versa.) Over the course of six to ten weeks of rehearsal, we weld these building blocks into an ensemble that is flexible, nuanced, engaged and alive, developing a shared musical understanding that enables us to bring to life the composer's intentions.

In my early years as chorus master, I believed that my sole task was to rehearse the mechanics of a work (notes, rhythms, dynamics, text, articulation), and thus to provide a foundation on which the performance conductor could realize his or her musical vision.

Now I see it differently: I believe that fostering a deeper relationship between the singers and the composition is as important as teaching the intricacies of the musical score. What moves us, I want to ask, in a particular text and its musical setting? The answer yields insights that are critical to the process of readying the chorus for a successful collaboration with the orchestra and conductor onstage.

The hows and whys of artistic expression are fascinating. And each project offers another opportunity to delve into the mysteries of musical creation, thanks to that magical union of words with music—and the profound intimacy of the singing voice. The singers and I investigate language, culture, history, religion, philosophy and individual psychology through the lens of choral music. The results are audible. And the exploration strengthens our capacity to build bridges to audiences and to enrich the entire community.

Educating, enriching, uniting, inspiring—and doing this through the power of the human voice: this would be my favorite answer to that recurrent question, "Just what do you do?"

**Kathy Saltzman Romey** is artistic director of the Minnesota Chorale, the Minnesota Orchestra's principal chorus, and choral advisor to the Orchestra; she is also director of choral activities at the University of Minnesota. This month the Chorale is featured alongside the Orchestra in performances of Handel's *Messiah* and Tiomkin's score for *It's a Wonderful Life*. The Chorale will also collaborate with the Orchestra next May in two choral-orchestral works: *Rachmaninoff's Three Russian Songs* and *Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms*.