

St. Mike's Springtime Messiah Sets Momentous Challenge

BRIAN CHANG

It happens every time after the *Hallelujah Chorus* in Handel's *Messiah*. There are always audience members in tears – profoundly affected by the art and majesty of the music.

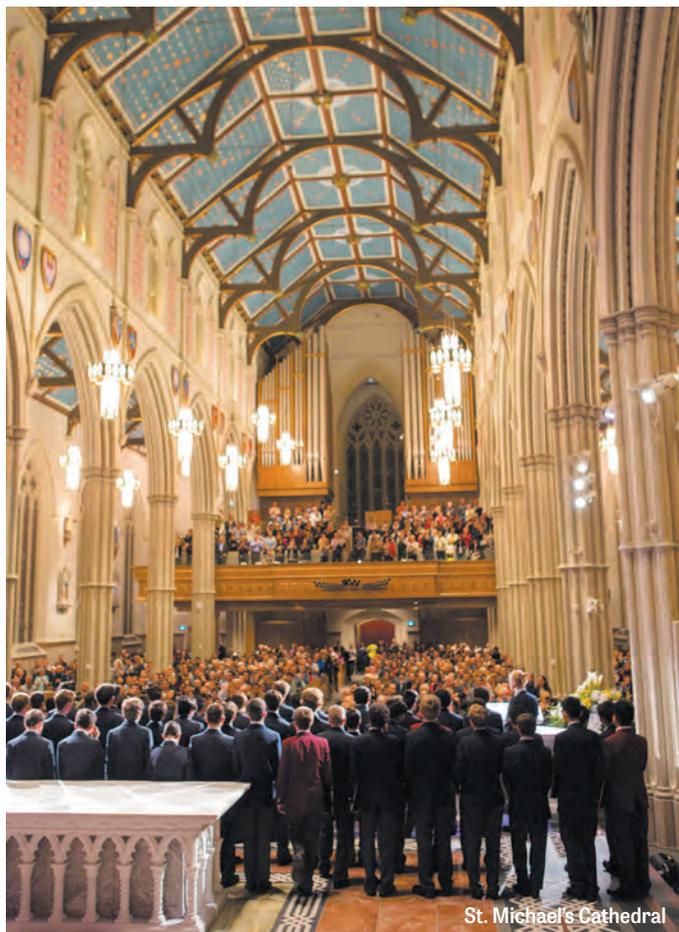
There are not many other major works that have this effect, and probably none that are so beloved in Toronto. St. Michael's Choir School performs Parts II and III of *Messiah* for Easter 2018, having performed *Part I* during Christmastime 2017.

There's a long European choral history of all-male choirs, commonly known as boy's and men's choirs. They're a common feature in many churches and boys' schools in Europe, for example in the Anglican tradition in the UK. They are not common in Canada, but a handful of Canadian boys' and men's choirs still exist. Few, anywhere, have such a storied history as St. Michael's Choir School in downtown Toronto. Adjacent to the head of the Archdiocese of Toronto – St. Michael's Cathedral Basilica – St. Mike's Choir School has been generating high-quality musicians since 1937.

Peter Mahon, interim choir head at St. Mike's, sat down with me over the March break to talk through their upcoming *Messiah* performance. I'm no stranger to *Messiah* myself, as a singer with the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir whose annual performances in Roy Thomson Hall with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra draw well over 8000 patrons over a week-long run. Mahon is also no stranger to the work as a singer: a veteran countertenor, he sings in the alto section of Tafelmusik Chamber Choir, whose own annual *Messiah* run reaches about 5000 patrons and includes the incomparable "Sing-Along Messiah" at Massey Hall.

Messiah is a big work, both technically challenging and requiring a high level of artistry. So, perhaps not surprisingly, as far as Mahon knows, the work has never been performed by the school. "It's very easy in a place like St. Michael's Choir School to only focus on what you do well," says Mahon. "These guys have to basically do a performance every week, preparing for a mass; four or five pieces of music, and the older boys, at least two pieces of chant. You can focus on that mass preparation, and there's loads of work to do." Mahon relishes the challenge of introducing this beloved Toronto tradition to the choristers of St. Mike's. "It's nice to have a change of pace. I think they're finding it very refreshing."

The first half of *Messiah*, performed by the school this past Christmas, has six chorales that are conventionally performed. Parts II and III have about double that amount depending on cuts



St. Michael's Cathedral

or additions. Unlike the Christmas performance, which numbered over 160 choristers, this time Mahon has assembled a smaller set of students, around 60, to present the work. The boys had to audition to perform in this concert. Any wrangling of children aged 10 to 17 is inherently challenging and Mahon appreciates that for this concert the boys *want* to be there, rather than *have* to be there.

Andrew Walker, an alumnus of the St. Michael's Choir school program, returns as one of the two tenor leads at the core of the tenor section. Other Tafelmusik professionals joining in are Richard Whittall and Simon Honeyman on countertenor/alto; Paul Jeffrey, joining Walker on tenor; and Joel Allison and Keith Lam on bass. All of them are joined by the all-boy treble line on soprano. Whittall and Honeyman share the alto solos and Michael Colvin joins as tenor soloist. The only female-identified voice will be Meredith Hall as soprano soloist.

"I had never done *Messiah* before I did it with St. James Cathedral," says Walker, joining me at a café before a Toronto Mendelssohn Choir rehearsal. He was introduced to the piece after leaving St. Mike's. "We never did a major work or oratorio while I was there. It was always about providing music for the Cathedral. Even when we did our major concerts for Christmas or the spring or fall, it was pretty much always motets."

Walker reflects on the power of being able to perform a work like *Messiah*: "I think it's incredibly difficult to know what it really feels like until you have done it. In Grade 5, I was in intermediate choir. It's the first year you start providing the music at the cathedral. But in Grade 5, to learn this music ... *Messiah* is a great piece of repertoire to sink your teeth into, but it's a big work to take on as one of the first pieces of music in just the first ten years of your life. It's exceptional. It's a good challenge and a testament to the teaching staff, Peter, Teri (Dunn), and Maria (Conkey)."

Mahon has added another challenge for the choir in this *Messiah*, by emphasizing Baroque interpretation and aspects of Baroque singing style: spacing between notes to give the music lightness and energy;