

Christopher Bell strikes soundly in his first D.C. outing

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Christopher Bell is an elfin, sprightly figure with curling, graying hair and eyes that twinkle through round glasses. He's also a highly regarded conductor. For years, Bell has been the chorus master of the Edinburgh Festival and the professional chorus at Grant Park, the summer festival with the Frank Gehry-designed pavilion in downtown Chicago. His National Youth Choir of Scotland has become a preferred partner of the conductor John Eliot Gardiner. And on Wednesday night, Bell took the stage of the Kennedy Center Concert Hall as the newest music director of the Washington Chorus.

"We're going to do our very best," he said to the audience in his lilting Irish accent (he was born in Ulster), looking out at the partly empty hall, "to make our concerts not be on a Wednesday night."

Those who were there on Wednesday were rewarded with a lively and often lovely program around the theme "U.K. meets U.S.," symbolic of the new relationship unfolding mellifluously onstage. And by the end of the night, Bell had won most of them over with his easy stage manner and the warmth and fluidity of the music he got from the chorus.

How did the Washington Chorus get someone such as Bell? The question spotlights the distinct place that large choruses hold in the international hierarchy: Choruses are major ensembles, but their conductors are viewed as something of a breed apart. [Julian Wachner](#), the chorus's previous music director, set out to change that perception. A dynamic if sometimes erratic composer and conductor of orchestras and operas, as well as choruses, Wachner introduced ambitious programming with some large-scale orchestral playing — from Mahler to [Philip Glass](#) — that many of his predecessors on the Washington scene might not have handled so easily. Wachner raised both the orchestra's profile and his own. He is now a fixture on New York's new- and early-music scene, and he established the chorus as an ensemble that someone such as Bell would want to take over.


As for Bell: Washington, he said in a conversation over coffee last week, offers him a chance to improve the work-life balance. It also gives him a chance to conduct. As his choruses have grown more successful, as the National Youth Choir of Scotland has, he has increasingly seen them getting invitations from other conductors. "I'd like some of that," he says, eager to take the podium again with his own ensemble.

On Wednesday, Bell showed that he is more than competent on that podium (he is associate conductor of the Ulster Orchestra and works with many others), although arguably without Wachner's dramatic flair, and still accustoming himself to the group's pickup orchestra. There were some moments of disparity in Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms." There was a richness, though, of concept and of the chorus's tone, with vivid diction — something, Bell said, that is particularly important to him. The boy soprano Aidan Stanton-Brand gave a reedy, confident rendering of the solo.

The program also managed to meet the delicate goal of being slightly different without being off-putting to more conventionally minded audiences. After the Bernstein came Morten Lauridsen's "Mid-Winter Songs," coincidentally the same piece the Washington Master Chorale offered in 2010 in its first outing as a midsize, semiprofessional group. With the Washington Chorus's larger forces, the piece — by one of the most popular living composers, who writes tonally and tunefully for chorus — sounded even more imposing and, well, wintry.

The conclusion was William Walton's "Belshazzar's Feast," amiably bombastic, with the baritone Igor Vieira holding his own, though slightly anticlimactic in the big vocal and instrumental swirlings surrounding the story of a blasphemous biblical ruler. The George Washington University Singers came along for the ride, as did two brass bands, antiphonally positioned in the balconies. Bell observed, looking up at the balconies, that some patrons were seated closer to the bands than they might have realized.

"You might want to move back," he said. "Or, on the other hand, it could be a wild ride." The audience, you might say, has been duly given notice.

Anne Midgette came to the Washington Post in 2008, when she consolidated her various cultural interests under the single title of chief classical music critic. She blogs at The Classical Beat.  Follow @classicalbeat