

Wachner to leave Washington Chorus after 9 seasons



By **Anne Midgette** Classical music critic/The Classical Beat February 24, 2016

The Washington Chorus is facing a complete change of leadership. Its longtime executive director, Dianne Peterson, is preparing to step down in June. Now, it will also be in the market for a new music director. The organization announced Wednesday that Julian Wachner, who has led the chorus since 2008, will leave at the end of the 2016-17 season.

The news is hardly a surprise. In 2010, Wachner became music director of Trinity Wall Street in New York. Since then, he has transformed that post — leading several ensembles, including the church choir, the Trinity Baroque Orchestra and the contemporary-music ensemble Novus NY — into a significant presence on the New York scene, participating not only in regular Trinity programs, but also in collaborations with a range of other New York presenters (the Prototype Festival, the Metropolitan Museum). Wachner also is an active composer and has an increasingly busy schedule of guest-conducting appearances, with big-league management — Opus 3 Artists — working to get him ever more. It's no secret that fitting Washington into his schedule has been a challenge; more notable than his departure, perhaps, is the fact that he has stayed here so long.

When Wachner took over, the chorus was still recovering from the difficult departure of its longtime music director Robert Shafer, whose dismissal by the chorus's board prompted something of a schism among the chorus's members. But choruses have a way of regenerating themselves as members cycle in and out. Today, the Washington Chorus is a young group that bears the stamp of Wachner's colorful programming — innovations such as the annual New Music for a New Age concert, focused on the work of a single living composer. (This year's installment, devoted to Luna Pearl Woolf, is Sunday.) The Essential series offered new perspectives on composers not necessarily known for their choral writing, including Wagner, Puccini and Bernstein, and the Washington Chorus's Christmas concerts now feature carol arrangements by Wachner that he gleefully calls "trashy" but that share some of his own slightly messy exuberance.

Peterson, who has kept everything running smoothly during Wachner's protracted absences, will be departing before the search for Wachner's replacement gets fully underway. (An announcement of her replacement is said to be imminent.) And the programming for Wachner's final season has yet to be made public. Whether Wachner will be back to guest-conduct the chorus is also unclear. But one way or another, chances are that music lovers will be able to hear more of him in the future.

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