

# Julian Wachner leads his last concert as music director of Washington Chorus

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By **Anne Midgette** May 15

When Julian Wachner arrived in Washington to head the Washington Chorus, he was seething with unfocused energy: a man with a lot to prove. On Sunday, nearly 10 years later, he led his valedictory performance as the chorus's music director. It was in many ways a typical Wachner performance — big and ambitious, pairing two 20th-century works with roots in the distant past, Stravinsky's "Oedipus Rex" and Orff's "Carmina Burana." But Wachner has less to prove now, and this was an amicable parting. The chorus announced his successor, the acclaimed Scotland-based conductor Christopher Bell, earlier this week.

Wachner brought a somewhat different approach to D.C.'s choral landscape. Rather than seeking a life partner in an ensemble, he made no secret of wanting to continue his career as a composer and conductor of other orchestras and operas. His innovations included a series devoted to new music, a series on prominent composers not mainly known for their choral works (Bernstein, Wagner, Mahler) and significant contemporary works. He also had a populist flair, manifest in his exuberant carol arrangements for the chorus's popular Christmas concerts. But partway through Wachner's Washington Chorus tenure, a new post at New York's Trinity Wall Street emerged as an even better vehicle for his disparate interests. In New York, he has become a darling of the new-music scene and early-music scene at the same time, while marrying and starting a family. His official departure from D.C. is a natural step.

Wachner leaves the chorus in good shape. It sounded fine Sunday, joining with the Gay Men's Chorus of Washington in Stravinsky's pounding, archaic lines, while the exuberant orchestra — Wachner is never too quiet — often all but drowned out the soloists. Margaret Lattimore was a clean, silvery Jocasta, firm and clear of tone in contrast to the men: Vale Rideout, who sang the tough role of Oedipus; Christopher Burchett, in several roles; and Morris Robinson, as a stentorian and deluxe Tiresias, all sounded a little furry.

"Oedipus" offers dark austerity; "Carmina Burana," bright austerity. Wachner brought a fluidity and verve to this familiar piece, emphasizing less the work's powerful sound than its sensuality and theatricality. The Children's Chorus of Washington and the boy and girl choristers of Washington National Cathedral sang angelically from the top balcony at the back of the hall, while the tenor Robert Baker rose from a side box and moved around the stage, singing plangently in the role of a roasting swan. The soprano Colleen Daly showed a mezzo-tinted lower register rising to a wonderful warm top.

Wachner takes up a lot of space, drawing the spotlight; Bell, his successor, may offer a more conventional approach. But the chorus was perhaps able to snare someone of Bell's international stature because Wachner has elevated its profile. Sunday's farewell was a happy goodbye between two parties looking forward to new beginnings — as smooth a transition as an organization can have. In a few days, Wachner will be back at the Kennedy Center, conducting a multimedia new-music project from New York, “The Hubble Cantata.” Washington won't lose sight of him in the years ahead.

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