

Prepare for the Unexpected: An Interview with Christopher Bell, Artistic Director and Conductor of The Washington Chorus

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Even in Washington, DC, a town unofficially known as the choral capital of the United States, Christopher Bell stands out as a milestone hire for The Washington Chorus (TWC). Bell, who just finished his first season as Artistic Director of TWC, has led the National Youth Choir of Scotland, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Ulster Orchestra, and the Edinburgh International Festival Chorus, among many other choral groups and orchestras in the UK. He has also served as Chorus Director for the Grant Park Music Festival in Chicago since 2002.



Christopher Bell directing The Washington Chorus. Photo by Shannon Finney.

During the 2017-18 season, Washington audiences got to experience Bell’s magnetic personality and a conducting style that draws out “warmth and fluidity” from the singers in the Chorus, according to The Washington Post.

The Washington Chorus has just announced its 2018-19 season, which includes Requiems by Johannes Brahms and Maurice Duruflé, concerts for Christmas and St. Patrick’s Day, James MacMillan’s *Cantos Sagrados*, and a collaboration with the National Symphony Orchestra on a world premiere work by Lera Auerbach for the Kennedy Center’s Direct Current Festival in 2019. Below, Bell shares some of his thoughts on the upcoming season, Christmas concerts in Washington, and what pieces are on his wishlist to conduct someday.

Last season was your first with TWC and you garnered some really great reviews. What do you want to accomplish during your second season?

I was thrilled that we were able to make such an impact in my first season. I’ve had a lot of fun working with the choir and the instrumentalists to put on all those concerts. Of course, I want to build on that, keep the momentum going and let people know there is a buzz about The Washington Chorus. I have a lot of new members, and a great season ahead. I want to drive forward, create a buzz, and direct astounding concerts.

It’s a diverse program. Is there an overall theme in what you’re performing this season?

The two requiems (Brahms and Duruflé) are well-loved pieces. Their pairings are unfamiliar, and yet I feel that the audience will appreciate them

more because their subject matter challenges us and the requiem comforts us afterward.

Recently I went to a conference and most of what I saw and heard there was familiar and reassuring, but the things I remember are the 5% of the conference I wasn’t expecting, hadn’t prepared for, and was completely bowled over by! So come to our concerts knowing the familiar, but be prepared to be bowled over by the unexpected.

You’ve done Christmas shows for years. What are you enjoying about doing them for DC audiences?



Christopher Bell directing The Washington Chorus. Photo by Shannon Finney.

The Washington Chorus Candlelight Christmas has some unique features that I just LOVE! The candles, the procession, and “The Dream Isaiah saw” just blew me away when I heard and saw them first. I have begun to add my own bells and whistles (literally! and pun intended).

The season includes a world premiere work on the Kennedy Center’s Direct Current Festival. What are your thoughts on balancing new music with familiar works that audiences might be more comfortable with?

I pretty much think it must be a balance. The headline work in a concert (Brahms/Duruflé) is what draws the audience to the concert, but the extra piece – the pairing – that’s the surprise, and hopefully the pleasant surprise that people enjoy unexpectedly.

Tell us about your personal experience with MacMillan’s *Cantos Sagrados*.

How long have you got? I was at University with James (Jimmy) MacMillan. It premiered in my home town of Edinburgh in 1990, and I recognized *Cantos Sagrados*’ greatness immediately.

In 1994 when the RSNO chorus (I was chorusmaster) was looking for a piece of music to celebrate its 150th anniversary, rather than commission a brand-new piece, we asked Jimmy MacMillan to orchestrate *Cantos*. I conducted the premiere of the orchestrated version, and since then have conducted about 20 performances of *Cantos*! I’ve performed it many times in Scotland, toured it to Australia, and performed it twice in Chicago. I’m thrilled to bring it to DC in its original version with the organ.

What plans do you have for TWC’s various educational initiatives and community engagement activities in 2018-19 and beyond?

We have dramatic plans for 2018-19 community engagement. Our aim is to “put the Washington in Washington Chorus.” We are aiming to pump up

our community engagement, working with care facilities to really make a difference. Watch this space!

At this point in your career, is there a choral work that you have not yet had the chance to conduct that you would really like to do?

A tantalizing, provocative, and exciting question. There are some large-scale choral pieces I’m happy to prepare and leave to others to conduct. But others I feel a great affinity with. Many of these pieces I have conducted I have really made my own. But the dream is to do a great piece, with a great chorus and a great orchestra. My wishlist: Vaughan Williams *Sea Symphony*, Mahler’s 8th symphony, and Britten *War Requiem*.

The Washington Chorus’ 2018-19 season begins November 18, 2018 with Brahms’ German Requiem & Britten’s Ballad of Heroes at the Kennedy Center – 2700 F Street, NW, in Washington, DC. For information and tickets to this and other performances, go online.