

ROBERT DALE CHORALE

March 2005

Dr. Steven Thomas, Music Director · (570) 586-3921 · www.robertdalechorale.org

Notes

Getting to Know RDC's New Music Director

Dr. STEVEN THOMAS

By Suzanne Harley

When Steven Thomas was named music director of the Robert Dale Chorale in June of 2004, everyone was impressed by his credentials, and had high hopes that he would continue the tradition of excellence set over the Chorale's twenty-six years under the leadership of Robert Dale Herrema. Steven has proven to be talented, hard-working, well-trained, and to have a fine ear and esthetic sense. He has come to be respected and liked by the singers and board of the Chorale, as well as by audiences. The following is an interview with Steven that took place in March.

Q: When and how did you first know you wanted to be a musician?

A: I've been a musician for almost as long as I can remember. Some of my earliest memories are of my mother teaching me to read music and to sing and play the piano, which she did when I was four years old. I began singing in church choirs a few years later and began playing the clarinet in elementary school. So I've always been active as a musician.

The decision to make music my profession, however, was a long process. I had a broad range of interests when I was growing up, especially mathematics and writing. I didn't decide to major in music until after I started college, and even after I graduated with a degree in music I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do with it. I took a year off from school and put together a small choir of friends from college, decided I loved conducting, and have been doing it ever since.

Q: Are you married and do you have children? Are other members of your family musicians?

A: I'm not married, but my long-time girlfriend is a singer and a voice teacher. My mother is a professional choir director, organist, piano teacher and harpsichord technician. My father has been a devoted church choir member for many years, and music always played a large role for me and my siblings.

I think music provides direct contact with beauty...

Q: What is your vision for the Robert Dale Chorale?

A: When I took over as music director, I was very conscious of the long and successful history of the group, and I wanted to get a sense of the group before I laid out any detailed plans for the future. Once my first season is over, I'm planning to reflect on how it went and work with the board to envision the group's future. One thing I can say for sure I want to do is to keep challenging the singers to achieve the very highest levels of artistry and communication with our audiences.

Q: If you could spend an evening with a composer of any era, who would it be and why would you choose that composer? What would you say to him/her?

A: Every time I study a score I have questions I would like to ask the composer – one of the joys and challenges of conducting is having to find answers to these questions on my own. I don't know if I could pick just one; my tastes are just too broad. But I will say that many of the terrific composers for chorus are very much alive and at least in theory open to dinner invitations. I do hope to be able to continue the Chorale's tradition of commissioning works and bringing major composers to our area.

Q: What do you consider when deciding what pieces to put together for a performance?



The Robert Dale Chorale, now under the direction of Dr. Steven Thomas

A: When picking music, I usually try to find some unifying concept for the concert. I've used themes (as in this fall's A Celebration of Singing), story lines, time periods, composers, composition teachers and their students, and other ideas. I also try to balance cohesion with variety so that the entire concert doesn't all sound the same. There's a fine art to picking pieces that work together and flow well.

Q: How do you think your first season is going so far?

A: I couldn't be happier! The Chorale has sung so beautifully in all our concerts, and we're still just getting to know each other. The dedication and support of the singers has been truly gratifying, and the board believes so strongly in the mission of the group that they're willing to go to any end to make things happen. Being involved with this group has been both humbling and inspiring, and I look forward to being a part of it for many years to come! (cont. on pg. 4)

A Warm Welcome

From RDC's New Music Director, Dr. Steven Thomas



Dear Friend of Choral Music,

As I look back over the season so far, it strikes me again what a pleasure it has been for me to be able to take over such a fine ensemble and begin trying to bring it to new heights. Our first three events of the year have been very successful: *A Celebration of Singing* in November, *A Northeast Christmas* and the *21st Annual Messiah Sing-Along* in December. If you were at these events, you know how well they went; if you weren't you missed out on some terrific choral singing!

We're now in the midst of preparations for the 20th annual Bach Festival, and I can't tell you how excited I am about it! The Chorale and I have been living and breathing Bach

since January, working to perfect our performance, and we're almost ready to share our work with you.

As in the past, the Bach Festival will consist of three concerts: an organ recital and a chamber music concert on Saturday, April 2, and the choral concert on Sunday, April 3.

I am happy to announce that this year's organ recital will be presented by Robert E. Wech, a native of Wilkes-Barre and currently organist at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in Scranton. Mr. Wech will of course be playing a number of works by J. S. Bach, and will also play a chorale prelude by Johann Peter Kellner that is based on a chorale that appears in one of the cantatas the Chorale is performing the following day.

The chamber music concert will again feature the talents of Dr. Lee Wilkins and members of the Bach Festival Orchestra. On the program is J. S. Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 as well as chamber works by Handel, C. P. E. Bach, and Mozart. I am also particularly looking forward to hearing a new work by that most contemporary Bach: B. V. D.

And now a little history: in 1723 Bach was hired as music director for the town of Leipzig and Cantor for the St. Thomas's School there. This was his last and most prestigious posi-

tion, for which he wrote most of the 300 or so cantatas that make up the largest part of his compositional output. Since the Chorale has such a close connection to these cantatas, I decided to celebrate my own new appointment by performing the first two cantatas that Bach wrote for his new position. Bach moved into his new lodgings on May 22 and performed the first of these works on May 30 – fortunately, we've had a little more time to get ready than his choir did! The two works are Cantata #75: *Die Elenden sollen essen* (*The wretched shall eat*) and Cantata #76: *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes* (*The heavens declare the glory of God*).

To fill out the program we are also doing Bach's Motet *Lobet den Herrn*. This piece has a special place in my heart: it was one of the pieces I cut my teeth on as a young choral accompanist in college. I put in so much time struggling to play the complex counterpoint from the open score that the work was forever imprinted on my brain. Now that I'm directing the Chorale I just couldn't pass up the opportunity to do the piece.

And I hope you won't pass up your opportunity to hear all this great music – see you at the Bach Festival!

Sincerely, *Steven Thomas*

Gracious Thanks

RDC Sponsors and Patrons

Talk about making a difference! Thanks to the many sponsors who make it possible for the RDC to consistently bring you the highest quality performances: **Bill and Doris Lees, John Weiss, Keystone College, Sandvik Materials Technology, Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts, Met Life Foundation Volunteer Ventures Program, Ross Family Foundation, and Kathryn Rudis.** If you can support the Chorale, please let us know!

Hardworking Volunteers

The dedicated folks of **R.S.V.P.** at the **Voluntary Action Center** help us get the newsletters and mailers in the mail and into your hands. Thanks to Nancy Post and all the volunteers. We could not do it without you!

Helping Hands Make All The Difference

Performance & Rehearsal Venues

For their continued support in providing beautiful venues for the community's enjoyment, RDC thanks **St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, Covenant Presbyterian Church, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, St. Nicholas Church, and St. Peter's Cathedral.**

Public Broadcasting Station

WVIA has been a long-time supporter of the Chorale, and makes audio recordings of each concert. Each December, WVIA broadcasts RDC's Annual Messiah Sing-Along. Their consistent support of the arts is appreciated.

And most importantly, our Audience!

It is for you that all of this happens... and it is you that will keep these concerts happening!

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You are not likely to meet a more humble member of the Robert Dale Chorale than Evelyn Munley. Her confident alto voice and quiet personal strength have been a core part of the Chorale for the past 19 years.

Evelyn is a self-described “home grown musician,” having inherited a love for music from her family. Her father conducted church choirs and Evelyn recalls having sung her first solo in church at the venerable age of three or four. She even has a recording of the debut performance.

Music continued to be a strong part of everyday family life, and her own love affair with choral music blossomed when she joined the Lackawanna Trail Madrigal Singers in their first year. The conductor, Mrs. Edith Doughty, instilled interest in the kids, challenging them with a wide repertoire of musical styles. What had been a family past-time now became something cool that other kids liked to do, too. She flourished.



Her next encounter with choral singing came in 1986 when her father, who at that time sang with the Robert Dale Chorale, encouraged Evelyn to audition for Bob.

Audition she did and she has not looked back since. Season after season, her musical abilities and her warm laughter bring a richness to the group she so dearly loves. In addition to the regular season, Evelyn is a member of the RDC Quartet. Since 1995, the Quartet has performed at nursing homes for home-bound residents. Evelyn also works tirelessly with Doris Bigelow-Lees to produce the Concert Programs audiences enjoy at each performance.

The wheels of time do turn, and now it is her children, Megan, 21, and Justin, 16, who have grown up with in a musical environment, and an environment of great friendships forged through the Chorale. Through a series of hard times that Evelyn has gracefully endured, from a death in the family to a devastating flood, she has found strength in her friends. “One of the most important things in life to me is music,” she said. “It is nice to have people who enjoy the same walk in life.”

A Closer Look

The 2005 Bach Festival - A Celebration of Excellence

Organ Recital

Saturday, April 2, 2005 at 5:30 pm
St. Peter's Cathedral, Scranton

Featuring Mr. Robert E. Wech, Organist

The Bach Festival kicks off in kingly splendor as Robert E. Wech delights both our souls and our ears with majestic organ pieces, including:

Toccata Adagio and Fugue in C major - J.S. Bach
Trio Sonata in C major - J.S. Bach
Chorale Prelude on "Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan" - Johann Peter Kellner
Prelude and Fugue in C major - J.S. Bach
Prelude and Fugue in a minor - J.S. Bach

Mr. Wech has been a church organist for over 40 years and is currently the Organist and Director of Music at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, Scranton. The recital will be played on the Casavant organ at St. Peter's, modeled after the organ played by Bach in Leipzig.

Chamber Music Concert

Saturday, April 2, 2005 at 8:30 pm
Covenant Presbyterian Church

Featuring Dr. Lee Wilkins, Concertmaster and the Bach Festival Orchestra

The celebration continues with a magical evening of “funforgettable” musical delights presented by Dr. Lee Wilkins and the Bach Festival Orchestra.

Members of the orchestra will perform solos, duets and ensemble pieces, weaving a web of music that will catch you in its spell. The Orchestra will also treat you to a wonderful performance of Brandenburg Concerto #6.

True to form, B.V.D. Bach will no doubt make an appearance as well, performing a humorous rendition of who-knows-what this year. Dr. Wilkins' talent and good humor ensure a night of memorable performances.

Choral Concert

Sunday, April 3, 2005 at 3:00 pm
Covenant Presbyterian Church

Featuring the Robert Dale Chorale and the Bach Festival Orchestra

When Bach took his new job in Leipzig, his first two compositions were Cantata #75 *Die Elenden sollen essen* and Cantata #76 *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes*.

Steven thought it fitting that on the occasion of his new job as music director of the Robert Dale Chorale, that these beautiful, but lesser-known, Cantatas be performed. Vocal solos by: Janet Zarnoski, Carol Tome, Wes Poole, Chris Gallo, Kathy Shucosky, Evelyn Munley, Gina Lehman, and Kathy Brink.

The grand finale of the 2005 Bach Festival will be the soaring Motet VI: *Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden*. Please join us and enjoy!

Q: Would you draw us a Steven Thomas time line that shows how you got to the Robert Dale Chorale?

A: I'm originally from Kansas City, Missouri, where I was born and for the most part raised. I graduated from a public high school in Kansas City and then attended college at Harvard University. I took a year off after college, as I mentioned earlier, and while conducting a group of my friends (which I called the "Ivory Tower Singers") I worked as a secretary at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. The following year I enrolled at the Yale School of Music to pursue a master's degree in choral conducting. I spent the next six years in New Haven, first as a master's student and then as a doctoral student. While I was there I supported myself primarily by working at the computer center at Yale teaching people how to use email and the internet, both of which were relatively new at the time.

After finishing the coursework for my degree, I was hired for a number of part-time

conducting positions, though it was still the computer work that put the food on the table. I taught at the University of Bridgeport, directed the Greater New Haven Community Chorus, the Kent Singers, and the Harmonia Choral Society. I was also invited by a friend to teach choral music at the Governor's School of North Carolina, where I ended up spending five rewarding and happy summers.

In the spring of 1999 I reached a time of decision: I wasn't earning enough money as a musician to make a living, and it was clear that the growing (and lucrative) computer field offered me a place if I wanted it. But I decided that I wanted to make a run at doing music full-time, so I gave my resignation to the computer center and headed down south for another summer in North Carolina, with no real idea how I was going to support myself come September. While there, I received the invitation from Wilkes University to be their Director of Choral Activities.

Since the fall of 1999 I have been working to build the choral program at Wilkes, work which I thoroughly enjoy. But I missed working with adults, so when I heard that Bob was planning to retire as music director I knew that I had to apply for the position. I had heard the group perform and knew how good it was, and I was eager for a new type of challenge. I was very happy when the search committee decided to give me the opportunity to continue the tradition that Bob started.

Q: How do you see music in the grand scheme of things in a complex world?

A: I think music provides direct contact with beauty, something which is all too lacking in most people's lives. Our culture is rife with superficial experiences, and the arts provide both opportunities for deep experiences and a reminder that beauty is worth seeking out. My dream is that our audiences will be touched by something we do in such a way that they learn to look for beauty not just in our concerts but in their everyday lives.

*Bach Festival
Order of Events*

ORGAN RECITAL

Saturday, April 2, 2005 at 5:30 pm
Saint Peter's Cathedral, Scranton
No admission fee. Free-will offering.
Robert E. Wech, Guest Organist

CHAMBER MUSIC CONCERT

Saturday, April 2, 2005 at 8:30 pm
Covenant Presbyterian Church, Scranton
with the Bach Festival Orchestra
Artistic Director, Dr. Lee Wilkins

CHORAL CONCERT

Sunday, April 3 at 3:00 pm
Covenant Presbyterian Church, Scranton
with the Robert Dale Chorale
and the Bach Festival Orchestra

Robert Dale Chorale

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