

Wachner to Head Washington Chorus

Conductor and Composer Brings Diverse Résumé

By Anne Midgette

Washington Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, April 1, 2008; C08

Everyone is looking for a new conductor these days. The National Symphony Orchestra is still engaged in what seems like a perpetual search to replace departing Music Director Leonard Slatkin. The Fairfax Symphony Orchestra has announced an "American Idol"-style season next year as candidates for its top post take turns leading the orchestra.

But the Washington Chorus is looking no longer. Its membership was told last night at a rehearsal that its new music director -- who is already scheduled to lead its April 27 concert -- is 38-year-old Julian Wachner.

The announcement marked the end of a year-and-a-half search that began when the chorus's board dismissed its director of 35 years, Robert Shafer, in 2006.

Wachner's appointment certainly signals a new direction for the chorus. In a local choral climate dominated by veteran directors who have led their organizations for many years, he arrives as a young, dynamic force for change, a conductor who is active in opera and orchestra performance as well as in choral work. The Washington Chorus will be a fixed point for him in a busy schedule -- he plans to establish a home in D.C. and be present, for the first season at least, at rehearsals every Monday night -- but he is also the principal conductor of Opera McGill at the university in Montreal. This season, he led the Pittsburgh Symphony (Handel's "Messiah") and the Honolulu Symphony, among others, and made his debut last July with the Glimmerglass Opera conducting Gluck's "Orphéus."

He is also a composer. Next week, he will oversee the first recording in a three-disc series of his own choral music, scheduled to be released by Naxos during the 2008-09 season; also in the works is a new disc on the Arsis label, which has already put out two other recordings. He is not, of course, recording these works with the Washington Chorus.

For all his spirit of innovation, Wachner will spend his first year building on tradition. The chorus's '08-09 season will include some repertory warhorses: the Verdi Requiem, the Bach B Minor Mass and Rachmaninoff's Vespers. This selection is also a bid to show Wachner's range, from orchestral drama (Verdi) to the a cappella liturgical tradition (Rachmaninoff) to baroque and early music, one of the conductor's particular specialties.

Still, it will be a departure for the chorus to work with someone who does not have its activity as his sole primary focus. On the other hand, the chorus seems to have responded well during a season of being led by different conductors as the three main job candidates took turns conducting the public concerts. The group has improved, Wachner said yesterday, since his first concert leading it last fall. Last night's rehearsal was the first for his initial concert as music-director designate; he will officially take over on July 1.

The Washington Chorus hopes that with this appointment, it is setting a new tone for the future. The city is remarkable in having four big-budget choruses, but all of its choral administrators wonder how long this Elysian state of affairs can last. And Washington's other choral directors, many of them still close to Shafer (whose newly founded City Choir of Washington will perform Monteverdi's Vespers at Strathmore on April 17), are watching developments at the Washington Chorus with mixed emotions and strong interest.

"I think it's wonderful," said J. Reilly Lewis, the music director of the Cathedral Choral Society and the Bach Consort, "that the chorus, thanks to Bob's having built it up to such a level, can attract the equally high level of talent represented by the candidates whom they've been considering this year."