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## Prelude to a Dream Career

by David Gordon Duke, BMus'71

*Kevin Zakresky, BMus'04, MMus'06, is Set to Rock the World of Choral Music.*

On the UBC campus, at its leafy best in early August, Kevin Michael Zakresky fit in perfectly with the other twenty-something summer students. He was trying out a shaved-head look for the season and sporting a fresh tattoo, one of the first things on his to-do list when he returned to the coast earlier in the summer from his new base in southern Virginia.

The new look somewhat belies his status in the music world; Kevin Zakresky is one of this country's rising conductors, a specialist in choral music with a strong back-up interest in historical performance practice.

He was back at UBC to conduct a musical theatre ensemble for the elite Young Artist Experience summer music program. YAE brings top young classical performers to campus, providing them with traditional workshops and coaching as well as a wider and more eclectic range of enrichment activities, such as musical theatre, African drumming and dance. Afterwards he shared his approaches to motivating young singers at the BC Choral Federation's Summer Workshops for teachers, and directed seminars on conducting. After a busy 2009/10 season including an assortment of workshops and adjudicating gigs, he'll return to campus next May to conduct in a special Chan Centre program celebrating the late Joyce Maguire, a greatly loved – and wonderfully effective – doyenne of the British Columbia choral scene.

At 27, Zakresky has accumulated a surprising amount of experience. He was active as a rehearsal pianist from his early teens, and has been playing piano (he was a soloist with the Prince George Symphony), singing tenor, and conducting for at least half his life.

Born in Saskatchewan, but hailing from Prince George, Zakresky came to Vancouver to study at UBC. Very quickly he entered the orbit of Bruce Pullan, the long-time conductor of the renowned Vancouver Bach Choir who, as it happened, was just starting a new phase of his teaching career at the School of Music. This proved a happy conjunction: Pullan's way with choirs and developing conductors made him the perfect mentor. Even

while studying at UBC, Zakresky landed the plum job of music director at St. Francis-in-the-Wood Church in the posh West Vancouver neighbourhood of Caulfeild Cove, and picked up conducting and coaching assignments for a number of Vancouver groups, including a gig with choral luminary Sir David Wilcocks on a sing-your-way-to-Alaska cruise.

"I got to do just about everything at UBC," says Zakresky, "from chant to contemporary music to Gilbert and Sullivan."

After completing his Master of Music degree in 2006, Zakresky sampled a number of different vocal and choral environments, including Cambridge, before deciding that the master's degree in Choral Conducting and doctoral program at Yale were the right next step for him.

Yale's lavish resources were a bit of a pleasant shock after cash-strapped British Columbia. Zakresky arrived on full scholarship, supplemented by a living stipend. For his master's thesis project, he was given a substantial US\$8500 to put together a team of performers. Most of the other grad students opted to conduct makeshift choirs with instrumental ensembles; Zakresky decided to stage Purcell's hour-long opera *Dido and Aeneas*, with soloists, small choir and period orchestra.

"I got players in from New York and planned the rehearsals very carefully, since they weren't all that interested in too many trips up to New Haven. I also got a theatre guy who was very, very familiar with the conventions of Restoration theatre." Ultimately they settled on a mixed historical/modern conception, with some period costumes and wigs and more trendy details like Aeneas, the caddish male lead of the piece, abandoning Dido with Starbucks mug in hand.

Yale was also a place to work with conducting guru Simon Carrington. "Simon was all about detail, detail, detail: know everything there is to know about a score before even thinking of conducting." Zakresky is now learning repertoire and prepping for doctoral level exams; he expects to complete his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from Yale in 2011.

While that's going on, he's not haunting the libraries of New Haven. Last year he was offered the position of Choirmaster and Music Program Director at Chatham Hall, a private Episcopal school for Girls in South Central Virginia.

"It's a wonderful environment: great resources, small classes and a very fine staff of teachers."

He's got big plans for this season: Britten's *Missa Brevis* or possibly the pageant opera *Noye's Fludde*, Medieval composer Hildegard von Bingen's *Ordo virtutum* (a religious allegory that he intends to stage as a beauty pageant) and a piece by Ontario composer Nancy Telfer: all demanding works well beyond regular high-school musical fare.

Much as he enjoys his new environment, as an ambitious conductor on the way up he has to keep his eye out for opportunities. At this stage in his career trajectory, working in the US is a distinct possibility, at least for the time being. But his ultimate dream is to find a conducting gig back here at home. Whatever pragmatic decisions dictate, there are matters of heart. In this Zakresky wears his loyalties, if not on his sleeve, then just as prominently displayed: the new tattoo is a Maple Leaf.

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