

# **Introducing Orpheum Voices: A new (and somewhat different) choir**

By DAVID GORDON DUKE, SPECIAL TO THE SUN June 17, 2013



### **The Orpheum Voices rehearsing in Pyatt Hall.**

Usually the official arrival of summer marks the end of the classical music season.

So what's going on with a performance of Fauré's serene and glorious Requiem on this first weekend of actual summer at Canadian Memorial Church? And who are the "Orpheum Voices," the ensemble mounting the performance with the Pacifica Singers and members of the West Coast Symphony?

Orpheum Voices is Vancouver's newest choral enterprise, the in-house ensemble of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra School, whose new home is tucked in behind the Orpheum Theatre.

Executive director Curtis Pendleton explains: "The VSO School of Music opened in the fall of 2011. Kevin Zakresky came on board last year for the express purpose of establishing choirs at the school, and he has certainly proved himself to be the Pied Piper of choristers. I believe we between 40 and 45 adult choir members at the moment."

Unlike most other performing ensembles, Orpheum Voices has a certain built-in flexibility: "We run by terms, so people come in and go out during the year, and the numbers change all the time."

It's an unusual undertaking for an unusual institution, Pendleton admits.

"This is the only school in North America directly attached to a major orchestra, and we are all still trying to figure out exactly what that means. Kevin is going to do a major work with Maestro Bramwell Tovey and the orchestra next year. We are trying to foster a deeper relationship with the orchestra for everyone that the school services."

Beyond this new choir for adults, an in-house children's choir will be the next addition to the VSO School roster.

Orpheum Voices has been singing together since January. "

The group is designed for adults who are not musical professionals, but who want to be engaged in the joy of making music and learning about music," says Pendleton. "We do have some very advanced students at the school, who we hope will become the professionals of the future. But we also want to appeal to adult learners — half of our 1,000 students — who have come back to music lessons, or who are coming in for their first lesson."

Pendleton has a favourite story about the school's multi-generational nature.

“At one of our very first recitals, a woman of about my own age came in, and I asked, ‘You’re here to hear one of your children play?’ and she said, ‘No, I’m here to hear my mother play! She’s 79, and doing a cello recital with her teacher.’”

Like most active professionals these days, Zakresky wears a number of hats: Conductor of the professional Prince George Symphony, leader of the Pacifica Singers (the cadet branch of the Vancouver Chamber Choir), and now founder-conductor of the community-based Orpheum Voices. Many of OV’s first complement of singers, like kinesiologist Gail Wilson, worked with him last December in a West Coast Symphony performance of Messiah and wanted to continue singing. “I love music and being associated with the VSO School of Music,” says Wilson. “I had worked with Kevin at Christmas. I was highly motivated, re-invigorated, and refreshed, and when I realized I could come here Saturday mornings — it had appeal because it was Saturday morning, not during the week — that’s what brought me here.”

It’s proving a very good fit. “I like to sing, and I can sight read a little bit. But I’ve been educated in all kinds of ways about music that I never thought I could be before.”

Matt Kennedy is a talented young musician, about to transfer from suburban Douglas College to the School of Music at UBC, who loves to conduct. As OV’s assistant conductor this term, he’s enthusiastic about the quality and commitment of the singers. “They are here because they care about the music. A lot of choirs sound nice and it’s a good extracurricular thing. But these people all have lives, other things they could be doing, yet they take time out of their very busy weekends to come down for two hours and sing and improve their voices. They take exceptional direction.”

Central to the Orpheum Voices concept, beyond the obvious joy of singing, is the serious thrill of learning (and learning about) the great classical repertoire. It’s about much more than getting a show ready for a single performance. Zakresky’s gig as conductor of the Prince George Symphony involves some serious travel time; he’s made a virtue out of necessity by scheduling workshops during his absences. Some have dealt with voice production, another was a “context and content” lecture about the unique aspects of French Romantic music, and there was even a rehearsal with VSO Maestro Bramwell Tovey.

“The special guests brought in bring a whole new perspective, not just the piece that we’re working on but the work that they do, so it’s very interesting,” says Wilson. “It’s opened up a whole new world for me. Now I feel part of this culture as never before, and I’m really excited about it.”

On Saturday it’s time for the term-end big sing. In addition to the Fauré, the Pacifica Singers start the program with a showcase of a cappella classics including works by Palestrina and Stanford, as well as that perennial favourite of the American choral repertoire, Randall Thomson’s Alleluia. If the “Orpheum Voices” launch marks the very end of the 2012/13 season, Chor Leoni Mens Choir’s Bard on the Beach show is the herald of Vancouver’s musical summer. This year’s “Best of Bard” program is the first for new Artistic Director Erick Lichte; his ensemble salutes the solstice with an eclectic mix of musical “shenanigans.” There are four performances, matinees at 3 p.m. and evening performances at 8, June 24 and July 1. But be warned: tickets tend to go fast!