

Conductor Note on A Festival of Church Choirs By Laurie Anne Hunter

It would probably be safe to say that everyone who has ever sung with the Rogue Valley Chorale has a history of singing in a choir and knows what joy comes from doing so. Science shows that singing makes us feel better. During a performance we get a surge of endorphins that also happen to alleviate pain. Music lowers our cortisol (stress hormone) levels and releases the neurotransmitters, dopamine and serotonin, that are associated with pleasure, alertness, euphoria and contentment. Many times, if I am tired or feeling a little under the weather, I wonder on my way to rehearsal, how I'm ever going to get through it. Without fail, every single time, I am energized and happy at the end of rehearsal. So I guess the science must be right!

I grew up singing in church choirs and periodically had the opportunity to attend church conferences, choir festivals, or gatherings that created a larger body of people singing together. They were always thrilling experiences, even when the music or musicians were not of a sophisticated nature. Science also tells us that group singing releases yet another chemical called oxytocin that manages anxiety and stress, while enhancing feelings of trust and bonding. It's no wonder then that an estimated 42.6 million Americans regularly sing in choruses today.

And yet, the number of church choirs seems to be dwindling. Indeed, many mainstream churches seem to find their congregations to be dying out, and many of those that are thriving, have music led by a "praise band" or "worship team" rather than a choir. So this may be a questionable time to be putting on a Festival of Church Choirs at all.

The mission of the Rogue Valley Chorale is to celebrate the joy of singing. And I want to spread that joy to as many people as possible. I want our membership to have the opportunity to be inspired by a celebrated guest conductor. I want people in smaller church choirs to have the opportunity to be part of this larger one.

Finally, there is the question of building a concert program of "church" music. Is this something our audiences really want to hear? And what about those singers and community members who don't identify as "Christian?" I could argue first of all, that all of western "classical" music is rooted historically in music of the church. But really, music serves to lift us up and inspire us, no matter our faith, especially when we make music together. It is my hope that the music we make today will bring us together as a community and create a microcosm of harmony in a world that needs every bit of harmony we can bring to it.