



Conductor was spurred on by two words

BY BY TAMMY ASNICAR FOR THE MAIL TRIBUNE | November 13, 2018

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Michael Morris owes his long career in music to fifth-grade violin lessons.

He desperately wanted to play and says he “bugged” his parents for two weeks before they relented and allowed him to take up the violin.

After mastering the violin, he played guitar and piano, and sang in the high school choir.

While Morris was a student at Fremont High School in Northern California, a teacher encouraged him to also conduct the choir.

While that teacher set him on what has become a long and winding career path, Morris jokes that it was his parents' disbelief that he could actually make a living in music that spurred him on.

"They said, 'You can't,' but I have," he says. "You can blame my mom and dad."

The Rogue Valley Chorale will open its 2018-2019 season Dec. 1 with Morris at the helm as the chorale's new artistic director and conductor.

The appointment, he says, was unexpected. He had planned to pull back a bit from the heavy teaching, conducting and performing schedule he had in the San Francisco Bay Area before moving to the Rogue Valley last year.

"But one never really retires from music," he says.

Morris is only the fourth conductor in the chorale's 45-year history.

After Lynn Sjolund, the chorale's founder and conductor for most of the first 40 years (he took a break for three years), retired in 2013, he was replaced by Laurie Anne Hunter, who left last June. Executive Director Laura Rich then started a national search for a replacement.

While she says she had "fabulous" applicants, it was Morris' impressive resume and auditions that won her over.

And it didn't hurt that one of Morris' lifelong friends and biggest fans put in a plug for him.

Joelle Graves, executive director of the Rogue Valley Symphony, has known Morris for 54 years.

The two attended middle school, high school and college together. Both were voice majors, and after Morris earned his master's degree, he became her vocal coach.

Graves says Morris has been coming to the Rogue Valley every year since 1988, when he sang in the Rogue Opera's production of "La Boheme."

She was the show's stage manager and heard firsthand his powerful voice.

Over the years, the two have performed together multiple times, and they are part of a quartet that includes Graves' husband and daughter.

"He has big shoes to fill," says Graves. "But he brings a particular flavor to a group of people who love the opportunity to sing as much as the music itself."

Although an opera aficionado, Morris says he loves chorale music.

"It's so much more than church music ... the music is fabulous."

Rich is impressed with Morris' knowledge of chorale literature. He also brings a repertoire of expressive gestures and movement — "theatrics that are perfect" for the Rogue Valley Chorale, she says.

"During rehearsals, he has us laughing all the time," she adds. "But he works us really, really hard."

On break from rehearsals for the chorale's upcoming holiday concert, "Magnificat," Morris reflected on his long career.

After receiving his master's degree in musical vocal performance from Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, California, and a bachelor's degree in music education from San Francisco State University, he studied opera at the American Institute of Music Studies in Graz, Austria. While there, he received the George London Award for Vocal Performance.

He served on the music and vocal faculties at Holy Names College in Oakland, Notre Dame de Namur University, Ohlone College in Fremont, Santa Clara University, and De Anza College in Cupertino.

Morris has been the music director and conductor for such diverse organizations as the Mission Peak Chamber Singers, Lyric Theatre of San Jose, Los Altos Conservatory Theater, Los Altos United Methodist, Saint Jude's Episcopal Church in Cupertino, and Saint Simon's Catholic Church in Los Altos.

A well-known and respected baritone soloist, he has sung the leading roles in some 80 operas, operettas and musicals. He is a frequent soloist for concert work with large orchestras and choral organizations.

He says he loves performing and conducting opera because of the dynamic combination of music and theater and the demand for “vocal prowess.”

Since 1976, Morris has instructed many professional singers and music teachers in his studio, and conducted voice, opera and choral workshops as well as vocal master classes in repertoire, performance and audition technique.

Morris says he has been “lucky” to have what he calls “a triad” — a three-pronged career — as voice teacher, conductor and singer for well over 40 years.

Guiding the “high-caliber” vocalists and musicians of the Rogue Valley Chorale, he says, “keeps my brain going.” And so far the chorale has shown “a willingness to learn, expand and grasp new things.”

“It’s exciting,” he says.

Morris’ wife, Linda, whom he met in choir during their college days in Cupertino, will be joining the Rogue Valley Chorale as an alto in January.

Commenting on the chorale’s new season and his own “new season” of life, Morris says, “I couldn’t wish any better for myself.”

Christmas with the chorale

The Rogue Valley Chorale will perform two versions of “Magnificat,” or “The Song of Mary” — one by Johann Sebastian Bach and the other by Franz Schubert — at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 1, and at 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 2, at the Craterian Theater, 23 S. Central Ave., Medford.

The music centers on the words spoken by Mary during her visit to her cousin Elizabeth. During the visit both women are pregnant, Mary with Jesus and Elizabeth with John the Baptist. “Magnificat” tells an important part of the Christmas story from Mary’s perspective.

Concert highlights include Bach’s “Magnificat in D Major,” which will be performed during the first act of the concert. Joining the singers will be the Rogue Valley Chorale Chamber Orchestra, composed of flute, oboe, bassoon, trumpet, timpani, organ/harpsichord, violin, viola, cello and bass.

Soloists for the piece consist of singers from within the chorale and from the broader community, including mezzo soprano Janet O'Donovan, soprano Pauline Sullivan, baritone Dan Fowler, alto Shelly Cox-Thornhill and tenor Terry Faulkner.

The second half of the concert begins with Schubert's "Magnificat," along with a variety of holiday carols. Soloists for the Schubert piece include soprano Jeffri Lynn-Carrington, tenor Phil Koenig, and bass Eric Smith and alto Shelly Cox-Thornhill. The chamber orchestra will rejoin the singers during Act Two and will also accompany several other pieces.

Carols and holiday favorites performed during the second act include "Mary's Little Boy Child," by Jester Hairston, "O Magnum Mysterium," by Morten Lauridsen, and "Can You Hear the Angels," by Greg Gilpin.

Audience members are invited to join the chorale in singing "What Child is This?" "The First Noel" and "Silent Night." The concert culminates with two orchestrated arrangements by Mack Wilberg; "Still, Still, Still" and "Joy to the World."

Tickets are \$20 and \$10 for adults, and \$5 for students and children. Tickets can be purchased online at www.craterian.org (www.craterian.org) or by calling 541-779-3000. Season passes are available. See www.roguevalleychorale.org (www.roguevalleychorale.org) for more information.

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