

OPERA NEWS

JANUARY 2016 — VOL. 80, NO. 7

Chorus Call

KENT TRITLE is one of North America's busiest choral conductors. This month he takes on the challenge of Mahler's mighty eighth symphony.

by *Allan Kozinn*.



Conducting at Manhattan School of Music
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FOR THE LAST FIFTEEN YEARS, Kent Tritle has been New York City's busiest choral conductor, with Musica Sacra, the Oratorio Society of New York and the choirs at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine all under his direction. He also teaches at the Manhattan School of Music and the Juilliard School, and his duties at the Cathedral include organ playing—something he does for the New York Philharmonic and the American Symphony Orchestra as well. One might think that his workload was sufficiently heavy, but this season, Tritle has decided, at fifty-five, that it's time to add Mahler's enormous Symphony No. 8 to his large repertory of choral works.

Tritle has never conducted this eighty-minute score, which fuses an ecstatic setting of the medieval hymn "Veni Creator Spiritus" with an almost operatic approach to scenes from the conclusion of Goethe's *Faust* in a magnificent, Mahlerian celebration of redemption. But he has played the work's organ part in performances led by Lorin Maazel and Leon Botstein, so he is keenly aware that the work's structure and proportions—to say nothing of the complexities

of Mahler's scoring for multiple choirs, a large orchestra (with an offstage brass ensemble) and soloists—make it a monster to hold together, let alone interpret persuasively.

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“IT'S A CHALLENGE” is his understated way of describing the project. Tritle, fortunately, has always been an organized and methodical musician, and over the summer, he put the finishing touches on his battle plan. The Oratorio Society and choirs from the Cathedral and the Manhattan School would start rehearsing the Mahler in September. He would have ten days with the Manhattan School's orchestra in February, and three full-scale, two-and-a-half-hour dress rehearsals in the days leading up to a single performance at the Cathedral on February 25. “This is something that's been on my bucket list, that I haven't gotten to jump in and do,” Tritle says. “And the minute I walked into St. John the Divine, thinking that I might work here, I thought that to do some of these musical creations that are really on a grand scale here, and to do them synergistically with the Manhattan School and the Oratorio Society, might be exactly the kind of thing the Cathedral should be doing for New York.” Tritle's forces will number about 360—a respectably hefty ensemble, if not quite the 1,030 that Mahler had for the premiere (hence the work's nickname, “The Symphony of a Thousand”). Mezzo-soprano Sara Murphy, tenor John Tiranno and bass Adam Lau are professionals; the other soloists will be graduate students from the Manhattan School.

“I think the work's redemption theme is very powerful,” says Tritle, who has spent most of his career leading sacred music, first as the founder of the acclaimed Sacred Music in a Sacred Space series at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, which he led from 1989 to 2011, when he left for the Cathedral. “The ‘Veni Creator’ is almost a testimony to the power of the Spirit. Then the bottom falls out, and we're in a more personal tale of someone who has sold his soul to the Devil but is redeemed. Then Mahler seizes on the idea of using the ‘Veni Creator’ again at the end and tucking it into his theme. He's integrated all this in pretty incredible ways.”



Playing the organ at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine

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ALONG WITH THE TECHNICAL and interpretive hurdles that any conductor of the Mahler Eighth must face, Tritle has another to conquer—the extremely vibrant acoustics at the Cathedral. He believes he has a solution, based

on an experiment he did last March, when he brought together singers and musicians from the Oratorio Society and the Manhattan School for a sold-out performance of the Verdi Requiem in the space. He brought in Leszek Wojcik, the manager of Carnegie Hall's recording facilities, to record the performance and to discuss the Cathedral's acoustics. "What I found," Tritle said, "is that there is a very real issue of sound going straight up, and not projecting forward, which is why I eventually would like to have a sound shell. For the Verdi, we turned on the house sound system a tiny bit, to get a little enhancement of the chorus down the Nave of the church. And with the Mahler, I'm going to have Leszek in again, and we're going to see if we can do something close to what the Philharmonic does when it performs at the Cathedral—just using a tiny bit of enhancement further down the Nave, for clarity and intelligibility. "Beyond that, the critical element is timing. Maybe you let the music breathe in a way you wouldn't in Carnegie. With the Verdi, we were able to use the space to dramatic effect. I think that in the Mahler, the beginning of the Faust portion is going to be amazing in that space."

This season, Tritle has already led two concerts each with the Oratorio Society and Musica Sacra, and each has a program still to come: Musica Sacra will perform Mozart's Solemn Vespers, K. 339, and a new oratorio, *Deborah*, by Evan Fein, at Alice Tully Hall on March 9, and the Oratorio Society offers Haydn's "Lord Nelson Mass" and Marjorie Merryman's cantata *Jonah* at Carnegie Hall on May 9.

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TRITLE CAME TO New York from Spirit Lake, Iowa, in 1982, to study the organ at Juilliard, and ended up completing a double major in organ and choral conducting, with Leonard Raver and Richard Westenburg as his principal teachers. He still maintains ties to his hometown, not only because his family still lives there but because, after a farming crash in the 1990s, he formed the KT Corporation, which took over a number of farm leases, and he became, in effect, a gentleman farmer. "It doesn't make any money," he said, "but they're still putting the crop in and taking the crop out."

Tritle's entrepreneurial side has driven his musical career as well. Shortly after becoming director of music at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, he persuaded the church to undertake a public concert series, which he called Sacred Music in a Sacred Space, borrowing from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine's then-defunct (and now, under Tritle, revived) Great Music in a Great Space. The series at St. Ignatius Loyola soon drew big audiences and glowing reviews. While still directing it, Tritle also became the music director of the Dessoff Choirs, a post he held until 2004. He also began conducting the Oratorio Society, replacing Lyndon Woodside shortly before his death, in 2005, at which time Tritle was named his successor. The same year, Tritle's old mentor, Richard Westenburg, invited him to join Musica Sacra. He became codirector in 2007, an arrangement that lasted until Westenburg's death in 2008, whereupon Tritle became the group's sole director.

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WITH THE MAHLER EIGHTH about to be crossed off his bucket list, Tritle says the list is still pretty long.

At the Cathedral, he is hoping to follow the Mahler with the Berlioz Requiem and Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*. And noting that, apart from Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, he has not conducted any opera, he has hopes in that direction as well.

"I think what happens is that people look at the number of things I'm doing, and they think, 'He's already too busy, I'm not going to ask him.' But I'd love to conduct opera. The closest I've come are things like Massenet's *Marie-Magdeleine* and some of the dramatic oratorios, which really come from an operatic impulse. What operas would I like to do? I have to say, I'm partial to Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. And *Billy Budd*, or any of the Britten operas. That's the direction I would gravitate towards." ■

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