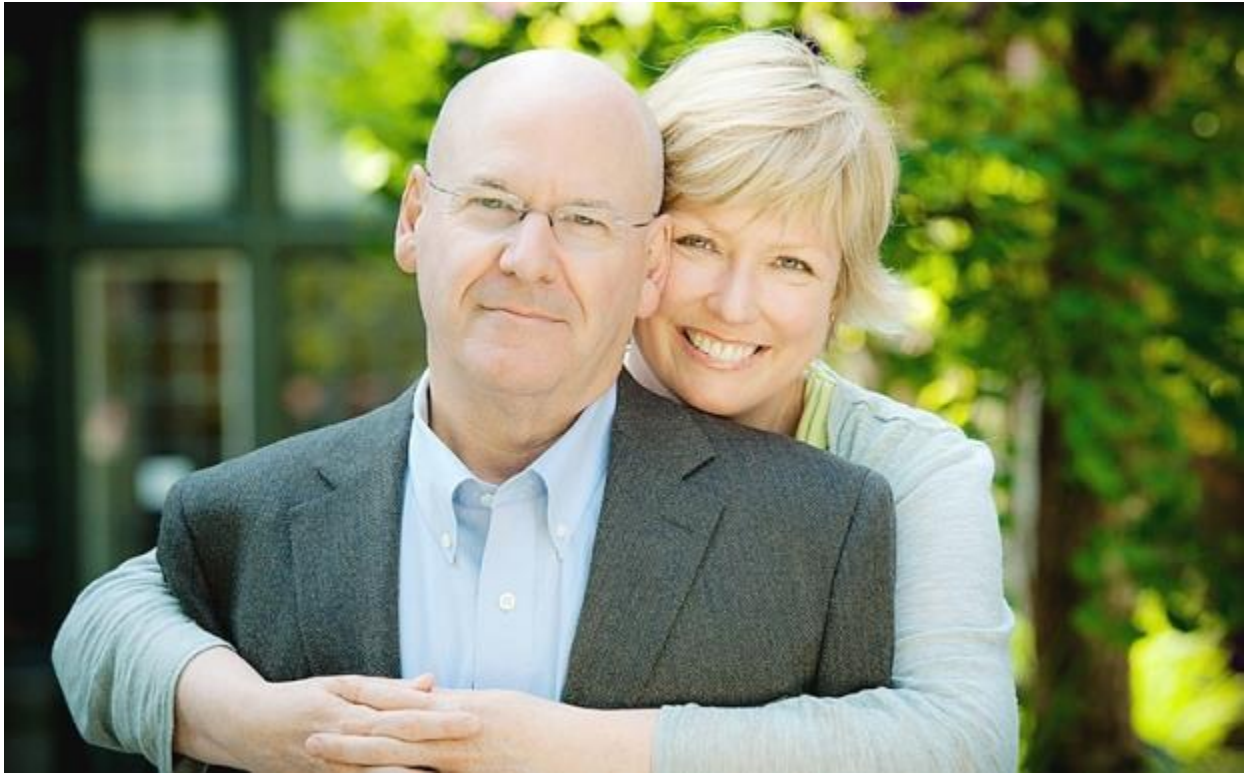


Choral capers inspire Stephen Chatman's new comic opera

World premiere performed by UBC ensemble this weekend

By David Gordon Duke,
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Composer Stephen Chatman worked with partner Tara Wohlberg on the comic opera *Choir Practice*, which receives its world premiere May 8 & 9 by the UBC Opera Ensemble. Photo: Martin Dee

Photograph by: Martin Dee

Choir Practice

Presented by UBC Opera

May 8 & 9, 7:30 p.m. at Old Auditorium, University of BC Campus (6344 Memorial Road)

The members may try to sound like angels, but choirs are notorious as hotbeds of intrigue and shenanigans. Stephen Chatman, Canada's most celebrated composer of choral music, ought to know. And he's prepared to show and tell all in his new one-act opera *Choir Practice*, which receives its world premiere this weekend by the UBC Opera Ensemble.

The project has been in the works for some time. Last summer, when I checked in with composer and librettist Tara Wohlberg, Chatman's partner in art and in life, the score was complete but still being orchestrated. Now the journey comes to an end with two performances in UBC's Old Auditorium.

Opera is creative heavy lifting, yet there don't seem to have been many unexpected strains along the way.

"The level of enthusiasm among the students has been particularly wonderful and gratifying," says Wohlberg. "A sense of humour is so private, yet the kids seem to be having fun kicking it up."

Chatman adds, "You always want to write music that sounds difficult and is actually easy. Conductor Jonathan Girard has selected the best 11 instrumentalists in the School of Music, making an ensemble cast of 28 altogether, including a real opera chorus."

Of course there were a few last-minute tweaks.

"I tried not to use extreme ranges for the students," says Chatman, "but I did wind up changing four or five low notes for the baritones — not that they couldn't sing them, but it was difficult together with the instruments."

Then there's the exquisite agony of hearing your work live for the very first time.

"We heard it together with the orchestra and cast yesterday afternoon, and that was a real eye-opener," Chatman said earlier this week. "It's not yet perfect, but it's fixable, most in terms of balance, especially with the single strings who have to play louder to balance the winds."

Wohlberg agrees. "It's been a roller coaster. The ratio of words to music is one to five, and therefore each word has to carry this enormous weight. Steve has set the English lyrics well, so I hope they will come across loud and clear."

Both are happy with director Nancy Hermiston's excellent team of young singers and the hand-picked instrumentalists.

"The tempi are fabulous, and in the hands of Girard it really rocks," enthuses Wohlberg. "He's absolutely nailed all the eclectic styles."

For those with a mind to watch for insider jokes these range, "from a little folksong, some aleatory improv, and some Phillip Glass licks," says Wohlberg.

"Also quotes from *Tristan und Isolde* and *Don Giovanni* with completely different words and music, a ragtime, a tango, even a short fragment of Schubert's *Ave Maria*," chimes in Chatman.

It's important not to give away the plot of a comic opera, so, avoiding spoiler alerts, here's the set-up: It's Vancouver, about 1985. A tenor makes his way to choir night for an entrance audition. Marilyn, one of the choristers, finds him irresistible. The ensemble's womanizing conductor isn't happy. Let the comedy begin.

Choir Practice's post-premiere prospects are better than most for exposure. The work has been taken on by prestigious publisher Highgate Press, which handles the rights to such opera luminaries

as Barber, Corigliano, and Menotti, and the Saturday performance will be live streamed by the Canadian Music Centre. The following week it will be recorded for Centrediscs.

“It’s a wonderful experience for young students to not only perform a world premiere but then also make a professional recording,” Wohlberg says.

And in a demonstration that in opera, production is everything, the annual Opera America conference happens in Washington DC this weekend.

“The performance will be live-streamed to the Opera America conference. It should go gangbusters,” says Wohlberg.

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