



March 1, 2009

A minute with ... Donald Nally

New director of Cincinnati's Vocal Arts Ensemble

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He's just the third director since 1979 to lead Cincinnati's Vocal Arts Ensemble. Donald Nally was named director of the elite choral group after a year-long search. The 48-year-old choral conductor comes from Chicago, where he is music director at the Lyric Opera. But Nally, a native of Hilltown, Pa., considers Cincinnati familiar turf because he's a graduate of the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music choral department.

An easy fit - In the second or third year of VAE's existence, I sang a couple of concerts with them. It's always been on my radar, because (founding director) Elmer Thomas was my first conducting teacher and (former director) Earl Rivers was on the CCM faculty. I think I can balance it with the Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Crossing, my choir in Philadelphia.

Dying to program - There are several composers that I have fallen in love with. One is Erhard Karkoschka. The way he takes this music you kind of recognize and molds it into a whole new environment is just amazing. Another composer is David Shapiro, and I've commissioned him a lot. And (Scottish composer) James MacMillan.

Selling modern music to audiences - There's good modern music and bad modern music. I choose music that I know our audience will be engaged in, and that they'll recognize the language.

The path started - I went to a small college, Mansfield State College in Pennsylvania, five minutes from the New York border, in the middle of nowhere. My professors suggested I go to CCM. I had started college as a saxophone major, and I played viola. Then I studied voice and music education at CCM. I had never heard of CCM.

Life-changing experience - I was singing with Elmer Thomas in the CCM Chamber Choir. ... We learned (Beethoven's) "Missa Solemnis," and performed it with (choral legend) Robert Shaw and five other choirs at a convention. I'll never forget that first rehearsal with Shaw. I just sat there knowing, "I want to do what he does." It really hit me.

How he became the chorus master for the Spoleto Festival in Italy - (Founder) Gian-Carlo Menotti called me, amazingly, and said, "Will you form a choir and bring it?" I said, "You want me to form my own professional choir, choose anyone I want, and bring it to Italy? I think the answer is yes."

Following footsteps - I'm really thrilled to be asked to follow these two teachers of mine. It sounds corny, but it's such an honor. It's great to walk into a situation where you have all this responsibility to do something that means something to the community.