

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

New leader for Lyric chorus

Director sets goals, strategy during his inaugural season

By John von Rhein | Tribune music critic
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Barely four months into his post at Lyric Opera of Chicago, Donald Nally has mapped out his long-term strategy as director of the Lyric Opera Chorus. He wants one of the finest opera choruses in the nation to become known as one of the finest opera choruses in the world.

Of course, the Lyric's new chorus master got a lot of help in that direction from his predecessor, Donald Palumbo, who made dramatic improvements with the Lyric chorus before he was lured to New York to become chorus director of the Metropolitan Opera.

Still, to judge from the admirable choral singing to be heard thus far in the season, Nally and the chorus are adjusting well to each other's needs and standards, and he has begun to affix his artistic stamp on the ensemble.

Nally started putting the Lyric's choristers through their paces as early as February and March of this year, five months before officially taking up his new duties with the group, which consists of 48 full-time professional singers and a core supplementary chorus of 12 voices.

That's because the current Lyric season is, for the chorus, one of the most extraordinarily demanding lineups of operas the company has ever mounted. The repertory ranges from standard works by Verdi and Puccini to more esoteric operas such as Handel's "Julius Caesar," Richard Strauss' "Die Frau Ohne Schatten" and John Adams' "Doctor Atomic." And those operas represent little more than half of the season.

No wonder that Nally, through a rueful smile, calls his maiden year at Lyric his "baptism by fire."

"This chorus has a fantastic reputation," says the 46-year-old Pennsylvania native, "and I knew of its work well before I accepted this job last year. They have welcomed me very warmly, and the supportive family atmosphere is across the board in this company."

Natural empathy for singers

Nally is relaxing between "Atomic" rehearsals in his office at the Civic Opera Building, a small room cluttered with his collection of oversize toy animals. There's a pig, turtle, goose and a giraffe named Jeremy who's in two parts because, as his owner explains, the beast is too tall to fit into either his office or his Near North Side condo across from the Lincoln Park Zoo, appropriately enough.

The empathy Nally feels toward choral singers comes naturally, because he was a choral singer himself before becoming a professional choral director.

While he was pursuing a degree in music education at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, he sang baritone with the Cincinnati Opera chorus. After a brief teaching

stint at the Chicago Academy for the Arts during the mid-1980s, he got a master's degree from the Westminster Choir College in Princeton, N.J., and later a doctorate from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, in choral literature and conducting.

Before the Lyric tapped him to succeed Palumbo, Nally was affiliated with the Welsh National Opera, for which he prepared the chorus and conducted the combined chorus and orchestra throughout Great Britain. Before that, he was based in Philadelphia, where he served as chorus master for the Opera Company of Philadelphia and artistic director of the Choral Arts Society of Philadelphia.

Nally "has a strong work ethic that compels him to probe deeply into the core of any given pursuit, be it a score, a philosophical issue or a human issue that needs resolution," said choral maestro Joseph Flummerfelt, longtime former director of the Westminster Choir and a close friend and ex-professor of Nally's, via e-mail. "To the choral art he brings an innate artistry coupled with the technical mastery to quickly absorb scores, no matter how complex. He has superb ears for sound, for tuning, for texture, for balance, and has the expertise to deal with vocal issues in a very effective manner."

A life-changing phone call.

In June 2006 Nally got the phone call from the Lyric's general director, Bill Mason, that changed his life.

The invitation to discuss his taking on the chorus director's job came at an opportune time. Nally was in the middle of a 15-month sabbatical, holed up alone in a cabin in Maine. By then he had severed ties with the Welsh National Opera ("Wales is a very dark, cloudy place, figuratively and literally," he says of the experience), and he was uncertain about what he wanted to do next. He was not even certain he wanted to work in opera again.

It took a whirlwind weekend in Chicago, during which Nally conferred with Lyric officials and sat down for a serious conversation with chorus members, to make up his mind.

"I immediately found a great company, a great theater, a great staff," he recalls. "I knew I liked Chicago, but I had forgotten that I love this city! I reconnected with friends here I hadn't seen in years. I don't necessarily believe in providence, but [accepting a position here] made all the sense in the world."

Rather than auditioning for Palumbo's post, Nally huddled for an hour with chorus members during which they peppered him with 20 detailed musical questions -- how he would distinguish between different musical styles, how he would handle disciplinary issues, how actively he would participate in staging decisions and so forth.

"One of the reasons I think the chorus and I are a [good] match," he says today, "is that I am used to working with voices in a lot of different ways, and big voices at that. I have experience in a wide variety of music besides opera. I direct a new music group in Philadelphia called The Crossing, and I used to do a lot of Renaissance music during my days as a church musician."

Staying on top of things.

After the Lyric's annual free concert at Millennium Park in September, the chorus master took his choristers out for a little food and drink and a lot of getting to know each other.

"He's definitely gone out of his way to make himself accessible to us," says William M. Combs, who has sung in the tenor section of the Lyric chorus for 12 years.

And that's not all. According to Combs, Nally worked as diligently to prepare the choruses for Puccini's "La Boheme" -- a popular operatic war horse that's easy to perform badly -- as he worked to prepare the formidable choral sections of "Doctor Atomic."

"He made sure we looked at 'Boheme' anew," says Combs. "Having sung three or four 'Bohemes' at Lyric, I think he definitely brought a fresh feel to it."

Nally would be the first to admit he and the chorus are in their honeymoon phase -- still sounding each other out, still seeking common ground with respect to musical and dramatic interpretation.

Every chorus director has his or her own rehearsal methods, and Nally is no exception. Sometimes he and the chorus find themselves on the same musical wavelength, while sometimes, says Combs, "it takes a couple of performances of a show before [we] really hit what he's looking for."

Which is to be expected, because Nally's tastes and ideas about choral style and sound inevitably are different from those of his predecessor.

Two distinct approaches

"Palumbo worked to get the chorus to produce a very deep, Italianate sound in the classic operatic tradition," Combs says. "His was almost a holistic approach, where everything was melded together. Nally comes from a much more modern choral viewpoint. He separates the music from the dramatic structure, takes it apart chord by chord, fine-tunes it and returns it to the overall structure. Each approach has its own validity.

"When you have a new person come in, your first instincts, professionally speaking, are, 'OK, what does he want? Let's give him that sound; let's make this work.' At the same time you ask yourself, 'Does he like my voice? Am I fitting into his big picture?' Those are some of the questions that float around in a new relationship like we're trying to build with Nally.

"I think that, as time goes by, everybody will start to find their place, just like he will start to find his place in the Lyric family," adds Combs.

That, according to the Lyric's new chorus master, already is taking place.

"Everybody here is really collegial and professional, and they trust you to do your job," Nally says. "When problems arise, they give you a little bit of a leash and let you fix those problems." He smiles. "It's a pretty sweet situation."