

2017 American Choral Directors Association National Conference

Tim Sharp, ACDA Executive Director

The biennial national conference of the American Choral Director's Association took place March 8-11, 2017, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Home to top college choral programs and leading ensembles, along with more than 4,000 choirs, Minnesota was the ideal location for the United States' premier choral conference.

The theme for this year's National Conference was *A Life of Song*. Tom Shelton, chair of the Conference Steering Committee, stated, "I selected this theme to honor every singer—no matter the age—from birth to 100+ years old. Singing is something we can do our entire lives!"

The conference comprised over 90 performances and 53 educational seminars for the more than 5,000 registered choral directors in attendance, and the additional 10,000 choir members, singers, students, chaperones, industry leaders, audience members, and guests in attendance. Performances took place at four venues in the downtown Minneapolis area: the Minneapolis Convention Center, Orchestra Hall, Central Lutheran Church, and Westminster Presbyterian Church. ACDA's Director for Conferences Craig Gregory spends the two years between conferences carefully booking venues and scheduling performances to best anticipate the size of the audience and needs of the performers.

Conference performers are invited to attend ACDA's national conference based on a process of blind judging, whereby a conductor submits a recording of his or her choir to be vetted anonymously by a panel of judges. Recordings are submitted

from a range of choirs from middle schools, high schools, colleges and universities, and professional organizations.

ACDA's premier choral event drew thousands from not just North America but from thirty-six different countries around the world. Included in the exciting and prestigious lineup of international performers was the Inner Mongolian Youth Choir; the eighty-voice Swedish male choir, Orphei Drangar; the Stuttgart Kammerchor; Canada's Hamilton Children's Choir; and Vox en Punto from Mexico. A favorite programming component for all attendees are the various international choirs.



Inner Mongolia Youth Choir, conducted by Yalungerile



Philip Brunelle opening the ceremony with his Minneapolis based ensemble, Vocalessence

The 2017 conference kicked off on Tuesday night with a “Welcome to Minneapolis” concert featuring Minnesota’s own VocalEssence Chorus, Philip Brunelle, artistic director; the distinguished composer Dominick Argento; The Singers–Minnesota Choral Artists, Matthew Culloton, conductor; and The Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra. Another highlight of the evening was Garrison Keillor, a native of Minnesota and longtime host of the radio program *A Prairie Home Companion*, who led an audience sing-along. The entire city was invited to attend this opening free concert.

Another conference highlight was a performance of the renowned

St. Olaf Christmas Festival, one of the oldest musical celebrations of Christmas in the United States (Anton Armstrong, festival director). The festival features nearly 600 student musicians, and participating ensembles include the St. Olaf Choir, the Viking Chorus and the St. Olaf Chapel Choir, the Manitou Singers, the St. Olaf Cantorei, and the St. Olaf Orchestra. Each group performs individually and as a mass ensemble, to the delight of listeners.

Honor choirs are an exciting component of each ACDA national conference. Singers from the elementary school age through college singers can submit recordings to be chosen through blind review by a panel of choral experts. The 2017 event included over 1200 singers across four honor choirs: children, conducted by Joan Gregoryk; middle school/junior high, conducted by Lynnel Joy Jenkins; high school, conducted by Eric Whitacre; and collegiate, conducted by Jeffery Ames. The conductors for each honor choir are esteemed names in the field of choral music and are chosen by the Conference Steering Committee. Eric Whitacre, Grammy-winning composer and conductor, also performed with his Eric Whitacre Singers for a packed house on Wednesday afternoon, March 8, the first full day of the conference.

ACDA's 2017 National Conference also included events such as a Gospel Brunch featuring LU Praise from Liberty University, and special evenings of music including Jazz Night, a Music in Worship Service, Contemporary/Commercial Showcase, and International Choir Concerts. ACDA strives to make their conferences inclusive of all genres, and attendees can find a wide range of music from across the country and around the world. Ringmasters, the 2012 World Champions of Barbershop, performed along with Crossroads, another world champion barbershop quartet. The United States Navy Band and Sea Chanters Chorus wowed audiences with their range of repertoire from the classic *God Bless America* to their spin on traditional sea chanteys.

Each national ACDA conference includes the world-premiere performance of the Raymond W. Brock Memorial Commission. This choral series was established in 1991, and the ACDA Executive Committee commissions a recognized composer to write a choral composition to be performed at the national conference. This year's Brock Memorial composer was J. A. C. Redford, a well-known film and choral composer, whose music has been heard by tens of millions of people worldwide, although many may not have realized it. Among numerous television and movie credits, he arranged and conducted Adele's Oscar-winning title song for the movie *Skyfall*, for which he also orchestrated the score. He wrote both the text and music for the 2017 ACDA Brock Commission piece, titled *Homing*. The work was first performed on Wednesday night by Magnum Chorum (Mark Stover, conductor). The second part of the program featured Orff's *Carmina Burana*, conducted by Robert Spano, Grammy Award-winning conductor, pianist, and composer.

Keeping with tradition, the conference delivered 53 breakout "interest" sessions, tailored to the most critical and timely topics of concern and interest to choral directors and choral music educators. Topics included active aging and the choral ensemble, the adolescent female changing voice, building an intergenerational male choir, honoring LGBTQ singers in the choral classroom, multicultural programming, and new ways to improve your conducting gesture. There were also panel discussions with top names in the choral field: Jo-Michael Scheibe, Jeffery Ames, Hilary Apfelstadt, Lynne Gackle, James Jordan, Dennis Schrock, and Phillip Swan.

One exciting addition this year to the national conference program was a Composer's Track specifically designed to promote the growth of emerging choral composers. This set of sessions premiered at the 2015 national conference with the goal of further developing one of the 12 purposes of the Association: "To foster and encourage choral composition of superior quality." Sessions included topics such as "The

Composer and Chorus,” “Composing in Choral Classrooms,” and a composition master class—an open forum with new compositions under composer-mentors Steven Sametz and Libby Larsen.



The Robert Shaw Choral Award is presented during each national conference to a choral leader who has made unusual and significant contributions to the art of choral music through teaching, conducting, and leadership. Nominations are submitted from ACDA membership, and the recipient is chosen by the ACDA Past Presidents' Council. Previous winners include choral giants such as Weston Noble, Paul Salamunovich, and Alice Parker. The 2017 Award was presented to Andre Thomas at a special reception on Friday night. There are other awards presented at the conference as well: the Julius Herford Dissertation Prize, sponsored by Classical Movements; the past-president's award; and inductions into the Wall of Honor, to honor deceased ACDA conductors. Seven conductors were inducted: Kenneth Jennings, Helen Kemp, Robert Page, Stephen Paulus, Raymond Robinson, Sir David Willcocks, and Stephen Zegree. During each National Conference, I have the

opportunity to address our membership with my “State of the Association” address, highlighting the various choral initiatives at work through ACDA.

One of the major draws of ACDA’s national conference is the opportunity for attendees to network with colleagues and “meet and greet” choral leaders and other mentors. Between concerts and interest sessions, there are a number of reading sessions, forums, exhibitor showcases, receptions, and rehearsals occurring throughout the day and into the evenings. For honor choir students, it is the highlight of their year to perform on a national stage, and teachers back home are equally as proud to have their students and school represented.

Those interested in taking a break from walking the exhibit halls, filled with booths from over three-hundred exhibitors and vendors, had the option of viewing one of two movies—*Big Voice*, an 83-minute documentary directed by Varda Bar-Kar that chronicles a challenging year in the life of a determined public high school choral director; and *Robert Shaw, Man of Many Voices*, a film about the music, life, and legacy of Robert Shaw that the *New York Times* called “poignant and compelling” (James R. Oestreich, April 27, 2016).



High School students conducted by Eric Whitacre

The 2017 National ACDA Conference concluded on Saturday, March 11, with a performance by the high school honor choir,

conducted by Eric Whitacre. The all-Whitacre program included his popular work *Godzilla Eats Las Vegas*. When asked how he selected the repertoire for the program, he said, “What I decided to do was just my own music, not out of a sense of vanity, but I thought at this point in my life I think I can be considered an authority on the music of Eric Whitacre. It was the one unique thing I, as a conductor, might be able to bring to their experience. I am the guy who wrote this, so here is the inner machinery of how all of this works” (interview with Tom Wine, November 26, 2016).

ACDA is now preparing for their 60th anniversary “Diamond Jubilee” National Conference, which will take place in Kansas City, Kansas, in March 2019. Each year the conference gets bigger and better, with more offerings, more venues, and more opportunity to learn from each other, share the beauty and passion of choral music, and live into our ACDA mission of “inspiring excellence in choral music education, performance, composition, and advocacy.”



Tim Sharp (BM, MCM, DMA) is Executive Director of the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), the national professional association for choral conductors, educators, scholars, students, and choral music industry representatives in the United States. He represents choral activity in the United States to the International Federation for Choral Music (IFCM). Sharp, himself an active choral conductor, researcher, and writer, has varied his career with executive positions in higher education, recording, and publishing. Prior to his leadership of ACDA, Sharp was Dean of Fine Arts at Rhodes College, Memphis, TN, and earlier, Director of Choral Activities at Belmont University, Nashville, TN. Tim's research and writing focuses pedagogically in conducting and

score analysis, and various published essays and books betray his eclectic interests in regional music history, acoustics, creativity, innovation, and aesthetics. He has conducted university, community, church, and children's choirs, and continues to serve as choral conductor and clinician in the United States and internationally. He is in his tenth year as Artistic Director/ Conductor of the Tulsa Oratorio Chorus, Tulsa, OK. *Innovation in the Ensemble Arts: Sustaining Creativity* is Tim's third book in the ensemble arts series published by GIA Publications, Inc. The other books in this series are *Mentoring in the Ensemble Arts: Helping Others Find Their Voice* and *Collaboration in the Ensemble Arts: Working and Playing Well with Others*. Dr. Sharp is a Life Fellow of Clare Hall, Cambridge University, with degrees in music and conducting from The School of Church Music of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Belmont University, and Bluefield College. He resides in Edmond, OK, with his wife Jane and daughter Emma Jane. Email: **sharp@acda.org**