SINGING through the years

Newburyport Choral Society tunes up for noteworthy anniversary

Change comes to the Newburyport Choral Society in its 85th year. It comes with George Case conducting his final choral society concerts after six years at the rostrum. The spring concerts are set for Saturday, May 9, and Sunday, May 10, at Belleville Congregational Church in Newburyport.

Continuity remains with the chorus undertaking yet another masterwork — "Elijah." Case will shape the sound of 140 singers, four soloists and a 30-member orchestra in Felix Mendelssohn's rousing narrative built on biblical prophecy.

"It is the great oratorio of the 19th century, and it was written for choral societies just like NCS," Case says. "We reach back in time and touch the same way of performing as those singers and players who first encountered 'Elijah.'"

Further choral society change arrives after the spring concert when Case hands the baton to a new music director, Ryan Turner. Turner, a Haverhill resident and the artistic director at Emmanuel Music in Boston, is, like his two predecessors, an accomplished performer — a tenor soloist — and an academic, on the faculty at the Longy School of Music of Bard College in Cambridge.

Overture

Ralph Johnson, 73, of Newbury, has been a singer for 66 years and a choral society member for 31 of those years. He's been a banker and boat builder in his working life, but always a choral society singer.

He has missed only one choral society concert in 31 years and has served as president of the organization. He is currently the logistics manager — a challenge in the upcoming show, finding space for the 155 performers.

Johnson remembers his first society practice in 1949. He was just out of college at Columbia University in New York City and back home in Newburyport.

He got a telephone call from his former Glee Club director at Governor Dummer Academy, Ben Stone, a member of the Newburyport Choral Society.

"He said, 'Ralph, you are going to..."
be singing with the Newburyport Choral Society — we need a bass," Johnson recalls.

Stone also told Johnson to pick up 93-year-old Mrs. Walley on his way to practice.

Johnson wasn't doing much at the time. His girlfriend, Joanne Lowell, who later became his wife, was away at college.

The Johnson couple would become ECS mainstays, Joanne joined in 1971. She died Sept. 12, 2019, and her husband carries on the pair's choral legacy.

In describing the choral society, Johnson uses one word: "family.

Members share responsibilities and joys, chief of which is singing, singing together.

He and the others love to sing.

And they all move to a distinct rhythm, the meter determined by preparing for and performing concerts.

The fall season starts the week after Labor Day, with Tuesday night practices leading to the Winter Concert the first week in December. For many folks in the city, it signals the start of the holiday season.

Preparation for the spring concert starts the first Tuesday of the new year and continues until the concerts the first week in May.

Chorus

The choral society's original name was the Newburyport Choral Singers, formed during the Great Depression by St. Paul's Church organist and choirmaster Clifton Lunt. He assembled the group from members of his small Amesbury women's choir and Newburyport folks, according to the society's history.

The first concert was in the spring of 1935 in Newburyport City Hall Auditorium. Lunt remained the music director for 32 years.

Newburyport has a rich choral tradition that started in 1848 with the Newburyport Choral Union, which performed regularly in the city's new entertainment center, the City Hall Auditorium.

Between 1872 and 1910, the union presented 41 concerts, including "Elijah" in 1906, according to the Newburyport Public Library Archival Center.

A pivotal moment in the Newburyport Choral Society's development came in 1978 with the hiring of Gerald "Jerry" Weale.

There had been seven directors in the previous 58 years, since Lunt's retirement in 1946.

Weale came to stay — for 27 years. He introduced a new practicality to the society.

He brought in professional orchestra players and soloists to the productions, says Mary Ann Lachat, the society's vice president.

The choral group made three European tours and grew in numbers under Weale, at one time getting up around 190 members.

Johnson says.

Arias

Weale and Case — who was once a student under Weale at Boston University — have brought academic and musical performance expertise to the choral society.

That is important, Johnson says.

Performers, especially vocalists, can demonstrate exactly what they want from a group of singers.

Academics bring interpretive powers to their teaching, giving the musical selections context.

Weale, who died on Dec. 1, 2018, brought to the choral society professionalism and context, precision, and a historical understanding of the pieces, says Johnson, who knew Weale from Glee Club at Columbia.

Weale was also a professional organist from his teens.

"He could sit down with a musical piece he had never seen, and it sounded like he'd been playing it for 10 years," Johnson says.

Case has brought a measured, even approach, Johnson says. He never raises his voice in anger, but his disapproval registers on his face. Say, when people are not paying attention.

"He brings a style, not laid-back, but well thought out," Johnson says. "And he has a beautiful singing voice, so he can demonstrate what he wants by singing it."

Lachat says that Case has built upon...
Weale's legacy, providing NCS singers and local audiences with an exciting repertoire that includes contemporary choral music, as well as choral masterpieces not previously performed locally.

"Because of his background in vocal performance and as a tenor soloist, he has created new standards for outstanding choral singing by demonstrating best practices in vocal production/techniques," Lachap says.

From the beginning of his tenure, Case recognized a reserved proficiency in the chorus, and he set about drawing from their sound more passion, abandon and joy.

"That's been our journey over the last six seasons, and I'm proud of the work we've done," he says. "They are a more joyous, versatile, enthusiastic and passionate chorus."

Coda

The ties that bind the choral society are many, but from the bass singers to the altos, from the membership to the officials, a singular draw is the singing.

"I love singing," says the society's president, Solomon Berman.

Nurturing that love will be the job of the next director, just as it has been the work of his predecessors.

By all accounts, the new director brings passion and energy to the post. And passion will be a hallmark of the spring concert, "Elijah."

The choral society last performed "Elijah" in the 1990s under Weale, Johnson recalls. The work is at times very quiet and at other times very loud, Johnson says. Its dramatic and theatrical passages will be narrated by an accomplished baritone soloist from the Minnesota Opera Company, Nicholas Davis.

"It has a lot of melodies that are fun to sing, and it tells stories," Johnson says. "This is really a story."

A story makes a fitting concert for the choral society celebrating its own story of 85 years. 

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George Case conducts the Newburyport Choral Society at a rehearsal at Belleville Congregational Church for this past December's Winter Concert, "Christmas With Brass."

Tony Dale photo