SING OUT
For 85 years, the Newburyport Choral Society has been filling the rafters with song.

BY JEANNE O'BRIEN COFFET

The room is vibrating with sound, as upwards of 100 voices weave up and down the scale. Singers press their hands to their faces, making odd noises and breathing as one, warming up for a two-hour rehearsal.

It turns out, singing is hard work. On this dreary February night, members of the Newburyport Choral Society (NCS) stand, sit, speak words in unison, sing melodies without words, and sometimes sing actual words and melodies together, working parts of "Elijah," composer Felix Mendelssohn's glorious Old Testament oratorio, over and over.

They even breathe together, says Penny Lazarus, who has been singing with the chorus for 20 years and currently serves as Alto I section leader. "That's one of the joys of being in a chorus. You can hear and feel your section-mates taking that breath to get ready. It erases all the differences that people may have outside of chorus."

In all, NCS will spend more than 30 hours breathing and singing together in preparation for a performance of "Elijah" later this year—a fitting tribute to the group's 85th anniversary this year. "Elijah" is action-packed, drama-filled, and has some of the most beautiful and exciting music that Mendelssohn ever wrote," says Dr. George Case, music director for the NCS. "It's truly a masterpiece. It also commands on a grand scale; the performance will include five soloists and a 30-piece orchestra, as well as the nearly 140-person chorus. All will be shoehorned into Newburyport's historic Belleville Church—the only venue in town big enough to fit 170 performers and an audience of 500. "It will be quite the spectacle."

It's a long way from the group's first performance, in 1935 at Newburyport City Hall, when a small ensemble from Amesbury got together with some volunteers from Newburyport to form the choral society. These days, members travel from Boston, Manchester, New Hampshire; and even Maine to be a part of the group. All the singers are amateurs but many have experience or even careers in music. The group doesn't require an audition, and with the support of fellow singers, even those with limited training can succeed.

"Singing is a very democratic instrument," Lazarus says. "I think that's why amateur choruses thrive—everybody has a voice and really everybody can learn how to use it."

Robert "Bob" Brodsky, Bass II, who has been with the chorus since 2007, agrees. "It doesn't matter that people say they can't read music. They are singing the music," says Brodsky. "Humility is the predominant emotion. We learn from each other and our conductors. We listen by listening." Soon the singers will be learning and listening to a new director. After seven years leading the chorus, Case is relocating to New Mexico to focus on performing, and will be replaced by Boston-area conductor Ryan Lee Turner, an accomplished tenor soloist and music educator who also serves as artistic director of Emmanuel Music in Boston, and is on the voice and early music faculty at the Longy School of Music of Bard College in Cambridge.

"Each music director brings new energy, new musical vision, and new ways of shaping our performances," says Solomon Berman, president of the choral society. "Under Ryan's baton, I'm eager to see how the chorus will grow its sound and repertoire. Indeed, the chorus has members in every age group, from twentiesomethings to those in their 80s. "There is no cutoff age for singing," says Brodsky, who at 84 is one of the senior members of the group. "As long as you are able to breathe, you can sing."