



Breaking The Fourth Wall: Interview with choral director Malcolm Merriweather

11/25/2016 by Tim Longo



One of the country's renowned amateur choirs, The Dessoff Choirs, opened its season this year at Alice Tully Hall on November 7th and have three upcoming holiday concerts on December 10th, 17th, and 18th. The Dessoff Choirs also started its season with a new director at the helm. After an intensive nationwide search, the Dessoff Choirs selected Malcolm J. Merriweather as only the 9th director in its storied 92-year history. Malcolm Merriweather, who grew up just outside of Buffalo, NY, is a young and talented musician trained in the classical tradition, with two Masters from Eastman School of Music, and a Doctorate from the Manhattan School of Music. He plans to continue the Dessoff tradition of presenting new works by contemporary composers as well as classic choral works, while extending the boundaries of concert performances, to engage audiences in new and exciting ways and break the fourth wall between the stage and the audience.

I recently sat down with Malcolm at a coffee shop near his home in Harlem to learn more about him, Dessooff, and his take on the direction of choral music in the digital age.

You're from upstate New York.

Malcolm: I'm from outside of Buffalo; Grand Island. Buffalo in the late 19th century had the same population as New York City. It was a place to be and a lot of that culture was retained there. I got my foundation in singing at the Cathedral in Buffalo; St Paul's Cathedral. I sang in their men and boys choir for eight years. I started when I was ten years old. This is a really professional choir. We had rehearsals three times a week, and I was paid to be in the choir even as a boy. The training I received was just outstanding. The musicianship skills, the ensemble skills, and even the lessons in dedication and punctuality. It was really required because of the rigorous nature of the program. We sang in Latin, German, French, and English. It was a really professional level program. The tradition stems from the UK tradition of having boys sing the soprano line and men sing the alto, tenor, bass lines which goes back eight hundred years. There's only a handful of choirs like this left in this country, maybe in the single digits now. The most famous is in New York City. Saint Thomas Church on 5th Ave. [The Buffalo experience] was great for me. It really prepared me for a rigorous, busy career as a professional musician in New York City.

I went to study music at Syracuse University as a singer and organist. Then I went on to the Eastman School of Music: two Masters there, in voice and conducting. My mentor, Barbara Tag, who was my first conducting teacher, she encouraged me to get into this conducting thing because I guess she saw something. She was my springboard into this world of conducting. She encouraged me to audition for the Master programs, and I got in. I was accepted and got a full scholarship to Eastman. I also met my voice teacher there; Rita Shane. She lived in New York and commuted to Rochester! She encouraged me to move to New York to pursue a career there. I moved to New York in 2010 and by January 2011, I was teaching, gigging and making a living. In New York, there are vast opportunities for singers in choirs, soloists, opera, conducting and you get paid to do it. I met Kent Tritle who's a huge name in choral music and the organist for the New York Philharmonic. He started a doctoral program at the Manhattan School of Music. I was accepted into that program and did my Doctorate and study under his tutelage. I worked with him at the Cathedral at St. John the Divine for four years and then ran the choristers program.

Does Dessooff have a certain sound that they are known for?

Malcolm: When you hear Dessooff a lot of people say that it's a professional sound, meaning that the voices are blended well, and the diction is at a high level

so you can understand the text. It's all amateur singers. No one is paid in this choir. Every musician in this choir comes in at a really high level. It's a very smart group of people. Intellectually, whatever they do for their day jobs -- lawyers, doctors, professors, homemakers, they're very smart and they work very hard on their music. They come in prepared for the rehearsals. We don't bang out notes on the piano. They read the music. Part of my goals over this year includes defining my musical tastes and implementing standards that everyone abides by as far as diction, intonation, rehearsal attendance; all of the things so that we can go forward and build on this great tradition.

Is there room to take the choir to the next step?

Malcolm: Absolutely. We have many goals; recording projects, commissioning contemporary composers. At our last concert we commissioned an orchestrated version of a piece that already existed from David Hurd. He wrote this inspiring piece about Martin Luther King Jr. We hope to commission him again in the future. There are a number of New York-based composers that I'm interested in working with because Dessoff has a history of premiering work of contemporary composers.

Does Dessoff have a feeder program to help fill in the membership?

Malcolm: We have a singing scholars' program which is for High School students, that's part of our community outreach. That will happen in the spring, and high school students are invited to audition. They will get to perform with the choir. It's an opportunity to sing and to have this experience at a high level.

I'm finding more young musicians from different mediums are attracted to choral music. I'm seeing this crossover in dance, indie rock, and jazz.

Malcolm: Over my five seasons in New York, I've noticed audiences need to be more engaged in more humanistic and relevant ways in order for arts organizations to survive. So I think that's why you're seeing a lot of cross-pollination. I'm interested in it. Next season I'm looking toward collaborating with dancers and choreographers for a couple of projects because there're all these different digital detractors from live music. The old school way of concerts; people on stage, audience quiet is not the future. One of my big initiatives with the Dessoff choirs is connecting with the audience. I want to have a lasting connection with our audience and provide an experience for them. A lot of times directors focus on the music and the choir but they don't even think about the audience.

I did my Doctorate on Gregg Smith, who started a choir in LA called the Gregg Smith Singers in the late 50s. It had an illustrious international career going on, with 46 city tours throughout the United States in the 60s, 70s, and early 80s. I mention this because Gregg had an interest in spatial music and

multidimensional music. His performance practice was to surround the audience with the sound and break down the fourth wall of performance. I'm really interested in that and I try to incorporate all of those aspects into my performances, as the space allows. It's really dependent on the space. For these upcoming holiday concerts that Dessoiff is doing, the audience is going to be surrounded by the choir. It's going to be a visual and aural experience for the audience.

Traditionally choirs have usually performed in churches. Is there a venue that you would like to have the choir perform at?

Malcolm: Dessoiff is looking to have a home base where we do all of our concerts. We rotate around, mostly to church venues. It's to offer our audience members a variety of experiences and a variety of locations around the city. Most of our concerts are in Manhattan. Artistically this semester I'm really interested in how the venue plays with the choir and voices, acoustically. If you have a great choir and a bad hall. It's a bad performance. We recently did a concert at Alice Tully Hall. It was so rewarding because it's a world-class hall. It's interesting because we're straddling both worlds of this traditional side of music, but also I'm trying to be edgier and more relevant. For example next season, I want to do an Earth Requiem. Our environment is a hot topic now. We have a president-elect who ignores scientific information about the decline of our earth. In this Earth Requiem, I want to combine visual artists who are interested in the earth and the environment and reflect those interests in their visual work. I'm looking for a venue where the performance can happen with the artwork surrounding the audience. There's an opportunity for them to get up and look at the work while the music is happening. I have a couple of ideas where this might work. I'm expanding the reach of Dessoiff, but I'm also looking to expand the financial reach for people who might be interested in supporting these causes.

Going back to the Baroque era and the Renaissance era, composers and musicians were performing music of their contemporaries. They weren't performing music of people who died a hundred years ago. This is one of the first times in history where we're performing music of all these people who have been dead for hundred of years. It's amazing music and yes, we should still be performing it, but we also have to look ahead and perform music that is relevant for us; socially, politically, internationally. We're doing a concert in May with the Dessoiff Choirs called 'A New Amorous World' , and we're singing in Chinese; we're singing in Creole. I'm bringing in two Haitian conductors. I do a project in Haiti where I started a children's choir called Voices of Haiti. We're collaborating with them. We're also bringing in the United Nations International High School. It's more than the music. There's more to our time on this earth than doing St. Matthew's Passion every five years.

The upcoming Dessoiff Choirs Holiday Concert Series

Saturday, December 10th, 2016 at Saint Peter's Church - 7:30 pm

Saturday, December 17th, 2016 at James Memorial Chapel, Union Theological Seminary - Messiah Sing 4:00 pm

Sunday, December 18th, 2016 at Saint John's Episcopal Church, Brooklyn - 4:00 pm

For complete listing of the Dessoiff Choirs season schedule visit dessoff.org