



## **DR. ANNE MATLACK CELEBRATES TWENTY YEARS WITH HARMONIUM CHORAL SOCIETY**

May 20, 2008

Dr. Anne Matlack is celebrating her twentieth anniversary as Artistic Director of Harmonium Choral Society.

Harmonium is one of New Jersey's leading choral arts organizations. Founded in 1979, it has been led by Yale-educated Artistic Director Dr. Anne Matlack since 1987. The 80-member chorus and its select 16-voice Chamber Singers are made up of committed male and female volunteer singers from in and around Morris County. Membership is by audition. Named Outstanding Arts Organization in 1998 by the Arts Council of the Morris Area, Harmonium is dedicated to performing a diverse repertoire at a high artistic level, and increasing community appreciation of choral music through concerts, education and outreach.

Harmonium is clearly a different organization than when Matlack started: it's bigger; its repertoire is more challenging; it's involved in many activities outside its own concert series; and its reputation for high quality and diversity has grown. How has this happened? Much can be attributed to Matlack, an excellent musician who is energetic but seldom impatient, demanding and supportive in equal measure, and the source of a never-ending stream of new and creative ways to bring people to choral singing.

Harmonium was originally formed as a small group of about 30 singers associated with the Pax Amicus theater group. In 1987, the group was ready to move on, and formed a search committee for a new artistic director who could take them to another level. Harmonium alto Jeri Herbert, past Board President and Treasurer, was a member of the search committee. The committee looked for someone who would challenge the group. After a few concerts, she recalls, the singers were joking among themselves "Be careful what you wish for!"

Matlack keeps track of her Harmonium time by looking at her daughter, Virginia. She has noted that she "...auditioned while I was pregnant with Virginia, started working when she was two months old, and she's now 20 and a vocal performance major at St. Olaf College." Linda Lancaster, longtime Harmonium soprano, and also past Treasurer and Board President, chaired the search committee. Matlack was only one of six finalists and, recalls Lancaster, "I know that there was some concern because she was pregnant... However, from the first moment I heard Anne's demo tape and read her letter that she wanted 'a choir to love,' I knew she was the one I wanted."

Herbert thought Matlack had so much to offer that she looked for a way she personally could help "to make sure Anne didn't go anywhere." So Herbert made herself available as a babysitter for daughter Virginia.

It was the job of Joan Tracy, Harmonium's accompanist since 1984, to contact potential candidates about auditioning. She also had an immediate positive reaction to Matlack. "When Anne said the worst thing that could happen in a performance was to lose the meaning of the music, that did it for me," comments Tracy. "She always encourages us singers to find meaning in the music for ourselves," Tracy continues, "then communicate that to the audience."

Martha Domonkos, a soprano who has been in Harmonium longer than she's been married, appreciates Matlack's vision. "When she took over the group, she was thinking large," says Domonkos. "She thought we could do larger works, hire professional instrumentalists, commission works." Domonkos remembers one of Matlack's first major initiatives was reaching out to the schools and community. Getting together a small group of Harmonium members

available during the day, Matlack found opportunities to present a music program which was both educational and entertaining in schools, libraries, and other venues. Matlack never misses an opportunity to get members of the audience involved - playing hand instruments, singing rounds, answering questions about the music - and they love it. She often dons some bit of costume appropriate to the occasion - perhaps a diva's boa or a Santa hat at Christmas time - and encourages her outreach singers to do the same.

David Hoadley, another long-timer in the group, just loves singing in Harmonium. Hoadley's early experience with Anne illustrates her supportive style. When Hoadley first joined the group for Anne's second season, he started a few weeks after rehearsals had begun, which put him behind the rest of the group. Anne invited him to come and work with her one-on-one. That motivated Hoadley to "get his act together," and the rest, as they say, is history. He's still singing with the group and loving every minute.

Matlack graduated *cum laude* with a BA in Music from Yale University, and got her MM and DMA of Choral Conducting at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. She is organist and choir director at Grace Episcopal Church in Madison, where she directs a full program of children and adult choirs and a concert series, Grace Community Music. She serves on the New Jersey board of the American Choral Directors Association as Repertoire and Standards Chair for Community Choirs. She is active as an adjudicator and clinician, and concertizes as an organist and flutist. In 2003 she was named Outstanding Arts Professional by the Arts Council of the Morris Area.

Matlack makes a practice of taking soloists from the group and allocating a portion of each concert to a small, select group of chamber singers, so as to attract better singers to Harmonium. She has helped build Harmonium's reputation as one of New Jersey's best choral groups with the eclectic repertoire and consistent high quality that attract new audience members. Willa Conrad, Classical Music Critic of the Newark Star-Ledger, observed in her March 2003 review of the group, "The pleasure in attending performances by the Harmonium Choral Society...lies in the intelligence of programming. Behind that programming lies the mind of music director Anne Matlack, and a fascinating musical mind it is..."

Matlack "melts the line between audience and performer," comments Domonkos. Adds Tracy, she "has brought refinement to the singing, with greater emphasis on dynamics, using word accents, and communicating with the audience." She inspires exhilarating performances like the *WHITMANIA* one last March, in which all works on the program were settings of Walt Whitman text. Normally Harmonium's recordings are a mixture of the best from both the Saturday and Sunday concerts, where the same program is repeated. This time the recording is going to be the live Sunday performance.

Robert Butts, Conductor of the Baroque Orchestra of New Jersey and classical music critic, reflected this when in a July 2003 review he commented... "In addition to being one of the best music ensembles of any kind, Harmonium has always been enjoyable to review and just experience because of the wealth of new and varied activities. And above all that, it's the sense of sharing and enjoying and pleasure that most comes through."

Another of Matlack's objectives is to expand the choral repertoire, which interests new composers in writing compositions for chorus, and gives choruses and audiences new musical experiences. Harmonium has taken two different approaches to make this happen: one is commissioning new choral works from established composers, and the other is sponsoring a choral composition contest for New Jersey high school students.

In 1999 Mark Miller, a talented keyboard artist, conductor and composer, became Harmonium's Composer-in-Residence. Harmonium has commissioned a number of his works, the latest one for the *WHITMANIA* concerts. The audiences gave the premiere of Miller's *Song of the Open Road* a standing ovation.

Harmonium has also premiered works by New Yorker Elliot Z. Levine, New Jerseyan Michael Mendoza and Minnesotan Edie Hill which were settings of texts by Jabez Van Cleef, a writer, Harmonium bass and, coincidentally, Matlack's husband. One of Harmonium's biggest commissions, *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, was by the Manhattan-based Matthew Harris. Harmonium has sung several other Harris compositions, including *Shakespeare Songs Book IV* on the June program.

Matlack often persuades contemporary composers whose works Harmonium performs to serve as judges of Harmonium's choral composition contest for high school students. Contest winners are given a monetary prize, and have their winning composition performed in a Harmonium concert. The upcoming June concerts include *Wandering Angus*, by Noah Berg, a senior at Millburn High School and Grand Prize Winner of the eleventh annual Harmonium Student Composition Contest.

Matlack's wide-ranging contacts within the musical community bring in a tremendous variety of facilitators for the annual spring choral musicianship workshops that she instituted - from a master of sight reading to a sacred harp expert to a jazz improviser.

Many Harmonium members will tell you that Harmonium has affected their lives. It's common for singers to mention that they sightread music much better than when they started. Others can cite the friendships, the memorable group experiences - even the marriages - that Harmonium engendered. Tracy, also a professional musician, teaching piano as well as accompanying several groups, has learned from Matlack, incorporating some of her musical interpretation techniques into her own pedagogy. "The fastest 2 hours of my life are 7-9 pm Sunday evenings [Harmonium rehearsals]," says Hoadley. "It's just so much fun!"

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