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Choral Communities

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de promouvoir la musique chorale pour tous
les Canadiens.*

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OUR PROFESSIONAL CHOIRS: A SERIES OF ARTICLES Article #1: Pro Coro Canada

By Marta McCarthy



Marta McCarthy is an Associate Professor at University of Guelph, where she conducts 4 choirs and teaches pedagogy and musicianship. She was conductor of the 2014 Ontario Youth Choir and has been recipient of the Elmer Iseler Conducting Fellowship, the Women of Distinction Award, and an Ontario Service Award. She is a member of the June Callwood Circle of Caring and is Past President of Choral Canada.

A RIDDLE

What do the Bee Gees and Arvo Pärt have in common? Answer: The commitment of one of Canada's – and the world's – finest choral ensembles. Whether it's 1970's pop, Handel's *Messiah*, or a 24-part microtonal work by an emerging composer, Pro Coro Canada will evoke the essence of the music and deliver a compelling performance of the highest standard.

HISTORY

Pro Coro Canada was founded in 1981 by Canadian Michel Marc Gervais; Anders Eby, Søren Hansen, Agnes Grossmann, Eva Bostrand, Richard Sparks, and since 2012, Michael Zaugg subsequently wore the mantle of Artistic Director and Principal Conductor. A resident ensemble at the Francis Winspear Centre for Music in Edmonton, this 24-voice choir performs regional concerts in Alberta, and runs a touring program of choral education for primary and secondary schools. Historical highlights include performances at the Toronto International Choral Festival (1994 and 2002), the 1988 Olympic Arts Festival, and Canadian Voices (a 2003 series of concerts celebrating 50 years of professional choral singing in Canada and R. Murray Schafer's 70th year), as well as hosting some of the most prestigious guest conductors in the world.

CURRENT HIGHLIGHTS

Pro Coro's Artistic Director and Principal Conductor, Michael Zaugg, acknowledges the strides made by the choir over the first four years of his tenure, and expresses admiration for the professionalism and diverse skill-sets of his singers. He mentions, for example, that the choir is capable of performing a wide range of repertoire because among the choir members there are composers who can supply high-quality, stylistically authentic arrangements in many genres, as well as excellent pop and jazz voices. In fact, for the past two seasons, Pro Coro Canada has augmented its 8-concert subscription series with performances by sub-groups of their own singers: the first sub-group, "ConSept" is earning praise for its renditions of the music of David Lang and for preparing Stockhausen's *Stimmung* to perform with just six voices: two concerts in Edmonton and one in Calgary are scheduled for May 2017. The second sub-group, "Consort", specializes in music of the Renaissance, (e.g. Schütz and Schein). The third, "Contrast", consists of between six and eight jazz and pop singers. These mini-ensembles capitalize on the manifold expertise within Pro Coro, while demonstrating that a professional choir can do more than sing Bach and Brahms.

Fundamentally however, Pro Coro's "calling card" lies in the sonority and integrity the ensemble brings to the most challenging and intricate of classical contemporary scores. Tim Sharp, a highly experienced conductor and the Executive Director of ACDA (American Choral Directors' Association), recently referred to Pro Coro Canada as a model of tone and sonority for chamber choirs in the United States. He also noted that Pro Coro Canada sets an exemplary standard of programming.

DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIPS: Composer-Conductor-Choir

Swiss-born and now calling Edmonton home, Zaugg champions composers of all nationalities, but is especially supportive of Canadians: last year, for example, Pro Coro performed more than twenty new works; each season they commission at least one or two new scores. Canadian premieres are also a priority when Zaugg chooses repertoire.

Moreover, Zaugg maintains a dynamic mentoring relationship with many young Canadian composers: He has worked consistently to create and nurture relationships with emerging composers since his tenure in Montreal – during which he was Chorus Master of *Orchestre symphonique de Montréal* (2006-2011) and conducted the *St. Lawrence Choir* (2008-2013) and the *Cantata Singers of Ottawa* (2005-5014). Zaugg thoroughly enjoys working with young composers, (including Cy Giacomini, David Archer, Matthew Emery, and Jason Noble, to name just a few), sharing scores and ideas with them, and engaging in an ongoing process of research, drafts, listening, and mutual inspiration. The choir also contributes to the composers' tutelage and the evolution of the score's final draft, by providing their input during rehearsals. "I have great singers," says Zaugg, "so if they make a suggestion, I trust it."

Zaugg receives several new scores each week, so he tends to be very specific about the kind of music he wants, providing clear parameters of key, text, shape, mood and theme. Hence, the music can stand on its own but also perfectly fit Pro Coro's concert program. Zaugg reminisces about a Skype conversation with Kristopher Fulton, during which Zaugg saw Fulton's comic books in the background: "So I asked for a piece based on these. The resulting score, *Twilight Cities*, enhanced my perception of the comic books I'd read since I was 12, which were full of Art Deco architecture. Since then, Kristopher and I have been talking about other choral works relating to comic books, and associated legends."

Regarding commissions, Zaugg believes that professional choirs can fill a singular niche for composers: "It's important for us to give composers broader scope and the opportunity to write for 16 parts, longer durations, and music that is extraordinarily challenging." He cites a 20-minute *cappella* score by Jason Noble as an example. Rare indeed is the choir that could rend this type of piece, which, Zaugg states, "challenges us and helps us to grow."

This past year, Pro Coro Canada featured Paul Mealar as their first Composer-in-Residence. The residency program evolved into a comprehensive series of interactions, forging relationships not only with Pro Coro, but also with the University of Alberta and the entire choral community of Edmonton. Thanks to different grants and private donors, Mealar came to Edmonton three times, participating in rehearsals, giving public lectures, meeting with young composers, and witnessing his works performed.

DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIPS: Pro Coro and the Community-at-Large

I asked Russ Mann, Pro Coro's Executive Director, to describe the choir's position in the local and national community. In his response, the word *respect* became a mantra, representing Pro Coro's approach to building a healthy and vibrant choral "family". Mann acknowledged the many elements and people upon whom the choir depends, starting with the composer (commissioned or otherwise), the publishers, those who manage the performance venues, the donors, the sponsors, and even the audiences, all of whom deserve consideration for the role that they play. "From there, we look outward: being respectful of the other community choirs around us. We have so many wonderful choirs and conductors in Edmonton – we want to respect them, communicate and cooperate with them. For example,

Michael developed a special Facebook page to post and adjust dates if possible. In the first year, Zaugg shifted the Pro Coro schedule to avoid conflicting with another choir's performance. This led to good relationships. Michael has worked with eleven community choirs in Edmonton and Pro Coro is very supportive of Choir Alberta and of Choral Canada. It's a matter of being respectful and playing a supportive and encouraging role for those organizations: if those organizations have strength, we are all stronger for it."

INNOVATION

One of the many innovations implemented by Pro Coro Canada is manifest in a flair for the dramatic: Zaugg intends to continue supplementing the choir's singing with "semi-staging" for certain repertoire. The goal of staging a choral work is not to create an operatic effect, but rather to proffer integrated artistic experiences that push the boundaries of traditional choral performance. Zaugg (and other conductors) emphasize the distinction between the dramatization Pro Coro used for their semi-staged production of Joby Talbot's *Path of Miracles*, and the choralography used by Show Choirs. Zaugg credits many children's choirs and *Xara Choral Theatre* of Nova Scotia for making bold strides in crossing artistic domains.

The innovative strokes on Pro Coro's canvas are too numerous to mention, but a collaboration with the Quasar Saxophone Quartet serves as an example from their current roster. The fifth of their annual Canadian Connections concerts – previous years featured collaborations with Vancouver Chamber Choir, The Elmer Iseler Singers, and Spiritus Chamber Choir - this event promises: "an eclectic program designed to explore the richness of our country's composers and performers."

EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Education and professional development for the broader community of choral practitioners is also a high priority for Pro Coro Canada. The choir will host no fewer than three conducting master

classes this year, with participants from South America, Europe, and Canada. Michael Zaugg's legacy as a choral educator runs deep: In 2009, he founded the Montreal Choral Institute, whose main mission is "to educate the choral leaders of tomorrow through master classes, workshops and performances." Podium 2012 delegates had the pleasure of hearing the Institute's resident choir, *voce boreales*, which specializes in the contemporary *cappella* music of Scandinavia and the Baltics as well as choral classics. Under Michael's leadership until 2014, the 24-voice ensemble has been featured in the Montreal Bach Festival, the NAC eXpressions Music Series, and on CBC Radio 2.

As conductor of the 2016 National Youth Choir, Zaugg afforded an exceptional opportunity to the Apprentice Conductor: Kathleen Allan conducted every score on the program at least once during the tour. Continuing in this vein of mentorship, Pro Coro Canada was the primary initiator of Choral Canada's Professional Choir Emerging Conductor Internship. This new program will provide unparalleled opportunities to young conductors via a range of offerings. Each participating professional choir has donated a unique set of benefits associated with their master classes. Candidates are chosen by application to Choral Canada. [For more information about this unfolding program, please contact Choral Canada's Vice President of Programs and Services, Dr. Rachel Rensink-Hoff.] Pro Coro will be offering a week-long residency with complete immersion in the life of a professional choir. Using Eric Ericson's model of an educational pyramid, Zaugg explains that it is essential for conductors to train with various levels of choirs, and for Canada to provide training at each tier of the pyramid. Otherwise, conductors, in spite of abilities and desire, may get stuck at one level.

Pro Coro also provides two distinct educational streams for singers and another for composers. The Emerging Artists Program, generously funded by a grant from the RBC Foundation, enables four Emerging Singers to be mentored and receive vocal coaching from a Pro Coro Canada singer. The Emerging Composer-in-Residence program will welcome Cy Giacomini for the 2016-17 season. Another Pro Coro initiative, the *#connect* program, will empower 24 young singers to rehearse and perform advanced repertoire with Pro Coro Canada, thereby experiencing a professional ensemble environment. In 2017, *#connect* participants will perform a *cappella* music by Brahms, LaVoy, Debussy, Fulton and Lotti, and join Pro Coro Canada in the Gala Concert of the Edmonton International Choral Festival with Swedish guest conductor Robert Sund.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Those of us who work with amateurs may believe that professional choir directors don't know our "real world". This is not so. Michael Zaugg, after all, spent 9 years teaching in Switzerland, starting with a grade 3-4 general classroom, responsible for a broad curriculum: sports, history, math, German. Among his pupils were troubled kids with behavioural issues, and those with ADHD, Down Syndrome, and Autism Spectrum Disorder. He and his aunt, who also taught there, established a choir to give the youngsters their first creative outlet and witnessed a substantial transformation: "The kids would go out and sing and dance rather than stab each other", reflects Zaugg. Eventually, Zaugg became the music specialist for grades 5 through 9 but was required to cover a broad spectrum: theory, choir, and band all in one. Zaugg says that those nine years taught him about setting expectations. "It must be 2-pronged: I have these expectations but I'll help the students to get there. It's imperative to know what a 12-year-old can achieve, and to set high expectations, but also we, the pedagogues, *must* have the tools to help the students get there." Zaugg confirms that this experience was "invaluable—I learned what youth can do – their capacities – and how to adjust the expectations and the toolkit" when he worked with the Swedish

Radio Choir, the Adolf Fredrik's Girls Choir and the Mikaeli Chamber Choir.

ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Since international touring is a hot topic right now, I asked Zaugg where his dream tour would take Pro Coro. Based on fond memories of participating in the World Youth Choir, the World Chamber Choir, the European Youth Choir, and in festivals such as EuropaCantat and the Zimriya Festival in Israel, Zaugg craves the means to take Pro Coro abroad, whether that be Europe, Asia, or elsewhere. Arts councils are supportive, but there's a limit to their mandates, so one challenge to touring for professional choirs is finding concert producers who can cover the singers' salaries. In the meantime, Zaugg ponders the way his singers would benefit by meeting other world-class choirs and by singing in historical venues across Europe—Vienna, Leipzig, London, Stockholm – "where you feel like you've stepped 500 years back in history as soon as you walk in. To correlate the abstract paintings with Stravinsky or the colours of the paintings that Bruckner saw! And when we sing Bach we should know how crammed the choir loft was where he performed – you realize that one or two singers per part was the only way because of the choir loft. Or to experience the incredible vast forests of Helsinki, you understand Sibelius' music in a whole new way."

Fortunately, Russ Mann confided that Pro Coro is working on plans to tour internationally in 2018. His approach to fundraising involves trying to understand what's important to funders and hosting organizations, to build meaningful connections. He notes that Canada Council values innovation, collaboration, and excellence – and wants to assist Canadian artists in "telling the story of Canadian arts and culture". Pro Coro's administration is building bridges, and in the meantime, says Russ, he and Michael liaise with their international guests - people like Ed Armitage and Paul Mealar – "and we dream-scape over a glass of wine!"