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North Shore Choral picks new director

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By [DOROTHY ANDRIES](#) Classical Music Writer

The North Shore Choral Society took two years to find a new director after conductor Donald Chen announced his resignation. The search has been completed and Julia Davids, 37, of Skokie, who holds a doctorate in choral conducting from Northwestern University in Evanston, has been named artistic director for the 120-voice amateur community chorus.

"We had more than 20 applicants," said Tom Keller of Deerfield, who headed the eight-member search committee, "and we interviewed each one personally for about an hour and a half."

Eight were then chosen to conduct half a rehearsal during the 2007-08 season, with Chen continuing to conduct all performances.

Three finalists were invited to prepare and conduct one concert each during the 2008-09 season, which concluded in May.

Keller credited the courtesy of conductor Chen with the measured pace of the selection. "He'd been our conductor for 24 years and he announced his resignation about two and a half years ago," Keller explained. "He said he would stay until the end of the 2008 season. That would give us a year to search and another year to try out the finalists."

The timing of the new appointment was also fortuitous. "Julia comes on this season, and will have a year with us before our big 75th anniversary season in 2010-11," Keller continued.

Davids grew up in Canada and came to the United States to study for a master's degree in choral conducting and voice performance at the University of Michigan. "My college, the University of Western Ontario, has a relationship with the University of Michigan," she explained. It was there she met her American husband, Baroque violinist Martin Davids.

She conducts a large mixed choir at Loyola University's Lake Shore campus and is director of Music Ministries at Trinity United Methodist Church in Wilmette. A soprano soloist, she has performed with the Calipygian Players, Publick Musick, Ars Musica, Opera Atelier and other ensembles in the U.S. and Canada, frequently appearing with her husband.

The program she chose to conduct last November in the first concert of the North Shore Choral Society's 2008-09 season was highly original. Titled "The Extraordinary Ordinary!" it included settings of the Ordinary of the Roman Catholic Mass by eight different composers, ranging from Palestrina in the 16th century to Samuel Barber in the 20th, plus Vivaldi, Bach, Mozart, and Schubert, and two living American composers, Michael Horvit and Robert Ray.

Keller commented on the powerful impression it made. "When Donald Chen looked at her program, he turned to me and said 'She's got a mass here,'" he said.

The choice hadn't come easily. "I was tormented, trying to figure out what to program for that concert," Davids admitted. "Do I put all the eggs in one basket? Then the choir might say I was good with one composer or one particular period of music, but what about other musical styles or periods?"

Her selection, which she said came to in a moment of inspiration, gave chorus members a chance to see how Davids prepared and conducted works by composers from every era of Western classical music, including the present.

"After each concert the singers were asked to evaluate the conductor," said pianist Sharon Rich Peterson of Chicago, the North Shore Choral Society's long-time accompanist, who is also staff accompanist for the Chicago Symphony Chorus. "The final decision was made by the search committee."

The committee was determined to provide a level playing field for the three candidates and assigned them each a budget of \$13,000 to hire soloists and an orchestra.

Dauids arranged for an orchestra to accompany the singers in all but two of the eight numbers.

"We paid a great deal of attention to the evaluations by the singers," explained Keller, who is himself a member of the chorus. "We asked about 20 or more characteristics, such as following the beat, enthusiasm and good overall fit. Julie came in first, but we learned from each of the candidates. Any one of them would have made a fine conductor for us."

Despite her youthfulness and engaging smile, Davids, by her own admission, can be a task master, a characteristic confirmed by Peterson. "During rehearsals you were very strict at times," she said, with a smile.

"I am a stickler for attendance," Davids continued. "It's just absolutely necessary to be at the rehearsals."

But to make sure that continuity is maintained, she initiated the audio taping of rehearsals, so absent singers can listen to rehearsals they missed. "One of my adult voice students, Stephen Latour, did it," she said, "but I tell the singers that even if you have a cold and can't sing, I'd like you to come and sit in the back."

Three concerts are planned for the season. The first will be Nov. 22 at the chorus's usual venue, the Parish Church of St. Luke in Evanston, where the North Shore Choral Society will sing Handel's "Messiah" for the first time since 1999.

"It's also the 250th anniversary of the composer's death," Davids observed.

The second program is March 14 and will feature sacred music from Jewish and Christian traditions, with Peace as the theme. The final concert is May 2 at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall on Northwestern University's Evanston campus, when the Chicago Philharmonic Orchestra and the North Shore Choral Society will unite to present Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 ("Choral"). For complete schedule, visit www.northshorechoral.org.

Davids has no plans to make sweeping changes to the chorus. "When an institution is 74 years young and has such a healthy membership, it is doing something right," she said.

But she does have some creative ideas about connecting with the community. "We're going to have a competition for young emerging singers," she said. "The winner will be a soloist with us at one of our concerts."

"I tend to be singer-like in my conducting," she explained. "I am a passionate individual and invest a lot in every single thing I do."

"And a performance of music is never perfect. We can always expand the imagination. That's what I hope I can do with the North Shore Choral Society -- I want to be moved by the music, I want the chorus to be moved. But I also want the audience to feel the chemistry of people making live music. Otherwise you can just put on a CD."

She paused. "Donald conducted the chorus for 24 years," she said. "I hope they want me that long too."

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