



In concert. Photo courtesy of the Master Singers

# Forty Years On Master Singers Make Joyful Noise



**The Master Singers'**

**40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala Concert**

**BACH TO BOLCOM**

**Saturday, May 9, 2009, 8:00 PM**

**First Parish Church, 7 Harrington  
Road, on the Battle Green, Lexington.**



Adam Grossman directs rehearsal at First Parish Church which is the Lexington home of the Master Singers.

By Jane Whitehead  
Photographs by Leo Gaskell

At 7.30 on a recent Wednesday evening, in the Theodore Parker Room in the basement of First Parish Church, Lexington, around twenty members of The Master Singers swing into a well-oiled warm up routine that takes them up and down scales and arpeggios to the accompaniment of Music Director Adam Grossman at the piano.

"Just men," says Grossman. "Mih, may, mah, moh, muh," sing the tenors and basses of the 26-strong chamber choir, now in its fortieth year. The group will celebrate this milestone anniversary with a Gala Concert on Saturday May 9, featuring the world premiere of Pulitzer Prize-winning composer William Bolcom's "Lady Liberty," a celebratory piece for voices and piano, dedicated by the composer to President Barack Obama.

Bringing a new piece of music to life is a challenging task. There are no recordings to listen to, no helpful notes from previous performances, and many revisions and tweaks are made in the rehearsal period. So when Grossman relinquishes the piano stool to long-time accompanist Eric Mazonson, who's just driven up from Providence, RI, the first order of business is to alter a few notes in the score of "Lady Liberty."

"Page nine, measure 52. Sopranos, your second note should be an F, not a G natural," says Grossman. Altos and tenors also have changes to note, then the whole

group, missing a few members owing to sickness and vacations, starts the piece from the top. Dressed in a tweed jacket and jeans, his silver hair and beard catching the light, Grossman conducts with as much energy as if this were his first rather than last rehearsal of the day. (He teaches in the public schools in Newton, Brookline and Somerville, as well as at the New England Conservatory Preparatory Department.)

After a few pages, he stops to fix the dynamics, and work on nuances of tone. The text, an unpublished poem by playwright and librettist Arnold Weinstein (1927-2005), includes martial passages about gunfire in battle, and more lyrical lines about Lady Liberty shielding the dead "as an eagle's wing keeps her young ones warm," and Grossman wants the singers to give a warmer color to the latter.

The harmonies are close and complex, with many singers struggling to find and hold their notes, at this early stage in the rehearsal cycle. Grossman is encouraging but demanding. "Stick to your G, basses!" he says.



"Tenors, get all the way up to C sharp!"

"These harmonies are strange," admits Grossman. "Can you play this, Eric?" he asks Mazonson. "We'll see," says Mazonson. He plays. "Yes, I can!" he says, and gets a laugh. "Eric's fabulous."

He can play whatever you want him to play, and he has way more personality than most accompanists are allowed to have," says Shaylor Lindsay, a professional musician, pianist, piano teacher and chorus director, who sang with the group from 1976 to 2006, in a conversation a couple of days after the rehearsal.

As sounds of another musical





Top: Current members rehearse for the upcoming 40th Anniversary concert at First Parish in Lexington. Bottom: The early years. Photo courtesy of the Master Singers.

group practicing in the sanctuary upstairs filter down to the basement, Grossman says, “Now we’re warmed up, let’s go back to the beginning, let’s try to make some sense of this.” This time round, he’s pleased with the group’s progress. “It’s getting there!” he says. “The harmonies do all work, when we get them!”

### ***Gala concert two years in planning***

“I’m very excited about this program,” said Grossman, during a lunch-time interview a few days earlier. (His day had begun at 7.30 a.m. with an orchestra rehearsal at Brookline High School.) For The Master Singers’ fortieth anniversary, “We wanted to do a concert that shows who we are,” he said. That meant choosing repertoire

that spans many styles and centuries, from J.S. Bach’s “Lobet den Herren,” to Bolcom’s “Lady Liberty.” The program also includes Haydn’s “The Storm,” a song cycle by Mendelssohn and Vaughan Williams’ “Serenade to Music.”

Grossman, a composer himself, has always encouraged the Master Singers to champion new works, and has conducted more than forty premieres. The first performance of “Lady Liberty” will be something of a family affair, as it was jointly commissioned by the Master Singers and the Vocal Arts Ensemble of Ann Arbor, Michigan, a group directed by Grossman’s brother, Benjamin Cohen. The simultaneous premiere works out well for everyone, said Grossman. The composer gets two performances of his work, and the commissioning groups split the cost.

The Gala Concert program will include another Bolcom composition that The Master Singers have performed before, “The Mask,” a setting of texts by African American poets on the experience of being black in America. “The piece is written to feature the pianist,” said Grossman, and he is delighted to do a piece that shows off Mazonson’s virtuosity. “Eric is a very important part of what we do,” he said.

Now in his fourteenth season with the group, Grossman said that in contrast with many local choruses, The Master Singers have chosen not to specialize in a particular genre or period of music. The experience and skill of the singers allows them to perform “a lot of different things differently,” said Grossman. One of the showcases for this versatility is the group’s annual Children’s Concert, which took place this year on April 4.

The Children’s Concert has been part of the Master Singers’ program for twelve years, most recently in collaboration with Music Director Amanda Hughes at Clarke Middle School. Working with adult singers, said Hughes, is a way to introduce middle school students to “music they might not choose on their own.” Perhaps more importantly: “They learn that music is for ever – it’s not just for the middle school years, or the high school years,” said Hughes.

### ***Rich History***

Founded in 1968 as a chamber chorus of The Masterworks Chorale, under the direction of the late Allen Lannom, The Master Singers became a separate group in 1977. “Thirty years later, there’s still confusion between the two groups!” says Shaylor Lindsay. (The Master Works Chorale is an ensemble of around 80 voices that focuses mainly on the giants of the classical choral repertoire.)

Master Singers’ founding member Harriet Chmela sings in both groups. She loves the music, the camaraderie, and the challenge of tackling new works by living composers. She remembers The Master Singers’ trip to Romania in 1973, when one of the venues was an Orthodox monastery in Transylvania. The group had been told not to sing anything overtly religious, and Allen Lannom had chosen a set of spirituals. Chmela recalls how peasants came in from the fields, drawn by the sound of singing in the small sanctuary. She snuffed a pungent animal smell wafting from a local man wearing a fleecy shepherd’s vest. Then she saw that he was weeping, moved to

tears by the music.

For soprano Meg Weston, a French teacher at Newton South High School who joined The Master Singers in 1977, the chance to work with local composers has been a highlight of singing with the group. “I get to sing new things every year!” she said. Weston, who grew up in a musical family, and whose mother had her “matching pitches” at age two, said that in spite of the ensemble’s high musical standards, “there aren’t any divas.” “We get along as people extremely well. It’s a very informal and fun atmosphere,” she said.

“Singing has been important to us our whole lives,” said alto Sarah Getty. She and her husband David, an experimental psychologist, have been with the group since 1976, and both served terms as President. As a poet and fiction writer, Getty appreciates Grossman’s sensitivity to the texts of the music they sing, and she was highly gratified when he set her poem “Ciphers” for chorus and flute choir. She also enjoys the chance to let her musical hair down and sing musical comedy numbers at the annual Pops concert.

Unlike most of his colleagues, Haris Papamichael had no experience of choral singing when he auditioned for The Master Singers 12 years ago. “I was shocked that I got in!” said Papamichael, an educational software developer. He has become one of the group’s leading tenor soloists, after studying for over eight years with Arlington-based singer and voice teacher Diana Cole. Grossman, said Papamichael, “really has a true passion about his job,” and has “a fantastic talent for choosing programs for the group.”

Thanks to The Master Singers’ long-standing commitment to “going beyond the run-of-the-mill repertoire,” said pianist Shaylor Lindsay, local audiences have an unusual opportunity to hear “a lot of interesting music, well sung.” She reminds those who are wary of contemporary music that: “Mozart was new once, Beethoven was new once. It always takes a while for audiences to understand and appreciate new kinds of sounds.”

It’s also true that hearing new work can give fresh resonance to familiar pieces. Which is why Adam Grossman and The Master Singers will present their Bolcom world premiere in the context of baroque, classical, romantic and twentieth-century masterpieces. It’s what they do best: sing varied works differently.