

Marking Time at the Laundromat

PENCILS, NOTES AND THE LIFE OF AN OBF CHORUS MEMBER by Suzi Steffen



OBF Chorus

A week or two ago, Amy Adams took her score for Sven-David Sandström's new *Messiah* to the laundromat. Not to wash or dry it, of course — she calls the score a beautiful, clean edition that has plenty of room for musicians' notes — but to sit with it in relative silence and, by reading it intensely, to achieve a mind-mold.

Adams, one of the few Eugene members of the 54-voice Oregon Bach Festival chorus and the manager for the Eugene Symphony Chorus, wants to understand the score as deeply as she can before practices begin. "Several months before the festival starts, they send a contract," she says — and then it's time to get started on those thick choral scores. Sometimes, because it's the Bach Festival and Bach's great choral works come around several times a decade, she already owns the music — the *B Minor Mass*, the *Weinachtsoratorium (Christmas Oratorio)*, the *St. Matthew Passion*. Not so much with newly commissioned works like the Sandström though Adams, unlike most of the other chorus members, got to sing it in an April 27 community preview held at the Wildish Theater in Springfield.

Adams teaches full-time at O'Hara during the school year, 10 music classes a day, and school barely ends before the rest of the OBF chorus and orchestra arrives from around the country. Professional musicians all, the singers take several weeks out of their lives to move lock, stock and barrel to Eugene. "I'm lucky," Adams says. "Everyone else either packs up and brings their family with them or has to leave their family behind."

With three kids, Adams knows full well the demands of parenting and working the almost more than full-time job. Five years ago, she gave birth to her youngest daughter a mere 18 days before the festival began. She doesn't really remember what she sang in 2004.

But she has her notes to remind her. Like any good chorus member, Adams travels with pencils. The Sandström, for instance, is covered in helpful notations (and by its performance on July 9, will have far more). First, Adams notes what year she's sung each score, so this one bears the date 2009. Then things get crazy. A vocal score can contain many parts, and the Sandström sometimes has six different parts going at once. Each singer has to find her way through that forest of notes.

"If you're looking at your line, you're wading through a lot of black ink, and you need some arrows," Adams says. "I mark up my scores with vertical hashmarks to make the beats leap off the page because after all, you're supposed to look over the score at your director."

That director, at least during rehearsals, is OBF chorusmaster Kathy Romey, director of choral music at the University of Minnesota and OBF founder Royce Saltzmann's daughter. That might sound a bit suspicious, but "it's totally not a case of nepotism," Adams says. "Kathy is absolutely amazing. She's like a windmill of information. I can always tell, when she looks out of the corner of her eye, she'll be telling you one thing, thinking about the next three or four things, and her hands are up, ready to start at measure 59."

Chorus members have between one and three "services" each day, which can mean a rehearsal, a performance or a Discovery Series. The Discovery Series, in which OBF Artistic Director Helmuth Rilling deconstructs passages of musical text (usually, but not always, Bach), sounds like a particularly genial but hardworking practice to the audience. Student conductors in Rilling's master class take the chorus and orchestra through various movements at the end of Rilling's hour of combined lecture and music. "I look forward to the Discovery Series almost as an audience member; [Rilling] puts me in student mode" Adams says. "You get something with every rehearsal moment with him."

Adams, a soprano, often gets placed near the center of the front row for performances, and that can be a bit unsettling. She has no doubts about Rilling's ability to handle new texts — "He totally inhabits the score, and we completely rely on him," she says — but she worries, as do other chorus members, about her own performance. "You look up from your score, and he's always looking at you," she says, "Everyone's thinking he's looking directly into your soul and maybe thinking you're unprepared."

It's hard to be unprepared, though, when chorus members and other musicians stay in contact year-round. When Adams got back from the laundromat, she wrote on Facebook about studying the score — and other singers were out there to help. "The bar is set so high," she says. "The Sandström is crazy; it's beautiful."

"I suppose it's possible that people might think it's nervy of Sandström to rewrite the *Messiah*, but it's such a big story, the whole birth and resurrection of Christ. It can definitely take more than one artist interpreting it."

And along with 53 other chorus members, the orchestra and conductor Helmuth Rilling, Adams helps interpret that story at 7:30 pm Thursday, July 9 — not to mention the other large-scale choral performances, Discovery Series and the extremely occasional night off during the two and a half weeks of the Bach Festival.

See more about the Sandström Messiah online, including interviews with chorus master Kathy Romey and OBF Artistic Administrator Michael Anderson.

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