

The Song Phoenix rises

What an emotional reunion! The Indianapolis Symphonic Choir gathered in person in Basile Opera rehearsal hall for its first in-person rehearsal since the covid lockdown. Eric Stark, the Music Director, gathered us into a large circle to sing Mozart's "Ave Verum" with no warm-up or exercises – just a song as we were in the moment. The emotions are hard to describe – warmth, joy, sadness, gladness, glee, happiness, regret – they are all there in the short clip posted on social media. Then it was down to business with our traditional warm up, and new songs to learn for our next concert "Musical Majesty of Choir & Organ", Saturday, October 2 at 5:30pm. More info: <https://indychoir.org/>

I flipped through the new repertoire. Ah, Faure's "Cantique de Jean Racine," a memorable choral piece for me. My mind flew back through the years to a beautiful little rehearsal room of the Congregational Church in Dennysville, a small Downeast Maine village. It was early evening of a lovely summer day. The rehearsal room was so light, with windows overlooking the forest and river. The singers straggled in – lots of sopranos, a sprinkling of altos and the rare male singer. My friend and colleague, Colin, was minister, music director and local historian. He and I had been working all day on our latest community research project. Colin was a gifted well-trained musician, who had once sung for David Willcox. I was an observer, a hard-core research scientist with a love of music, but not especially well-informed. Colin raised his baton; the singers warmed up and began to sing through their upcoming program. Their longtime beloved organist had died recently. Her favorite piece was "The Cantique de Jean Racine" and they wanted to sing this for her funeral. Living in rural Maine, they were used to the French language with its Quebécois intonation. They sang with feeling, full of memories of their organist, and a little anxious with a stranger in their midst. I was so moved by the music. I told them over and over how beautiful their music was. "Sing it with us" they exclaimed, and my friend urged. I wanted to join them; I had not sung since a child and could not bring myself to try, having been told so many times that I was a bad singer. I envied them their obvious joy and fellowship in singing; briefly wondered about singing in a choir; and dismissed the thought as "not for me". A tiny seed was planted that evening, and left neglected for several years as I finished out my medical research career. Years later, in the middle of deep depression, that seed of an idea came back. I took singing lessons when I retired and was accepted into the wonderful ISC 7 years ago. And now finally, in this rehearsal, I was singing through the Cantique de Jean Racine, my mind full of memories and gratitude to Colin and his small band of singers.

The wonders of the rehearsal were not yet done. Before I joined the ISC, I sang with St Paul's Episcopal Church Choir, my first choir after I learnt to sing. The first

concert I sang with them was Mozart's "Vesperae solennes de confessore (Solemn Vespers for a Confessor), K. 339", which contains the lush "Laudate Dominum". The solo was sung by our soprano section leader, Sara, who had a gorgeous voice, full of golden lights and cream. I promptly fell in love with the song. A few years later, I attempted to learn it, and wondered at Sara's breath control! It is a song that is as satisfying to sing solo, as it is to sing the choral surround. And here it was – in our program for October. O joy!

Then among the other pieces, up popped "Heart of God" by Francisco Carbonell, the winner of ISC's 2020 Carol Competition for young composers. We had learnt this in our homes during covid isolation and used guide tracks (Holly had sung one of the clearest alto guide tracks I had ever heard during my work singing in virtual choirs in this period) to each make a virtual recording. ISC produced a lovely video, aligning, layering and assembling all the tracks with audio technology. For all of us in the rehearsal this week, singing that together was so full of feeling – instead of listening to our noisy breathing, omitted or wrong notes and maybe dynamics, maybe not, in our individual recordings, we were a living organism, breathing together with the sound swelling or quieting together, as Eric bent and swayed, his baton catching most eyes.

The Song Phoenix rises ISC was back.