

# The Handel Society of Dartmouth College

By JESSICA LAHEY

Photography by JON GILBERT FOX



Dr. Robert Duff conducts the Handel Society of Dartmouth College in a 2013 rehearsal.

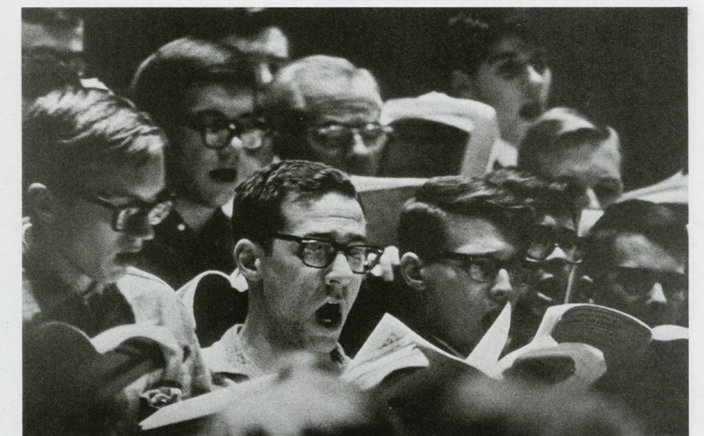
Five minutes into my first experience at a Handel Society of Dartmouth College concert, I realized I had completely and woefully underestimated both the Society and the experience of hearing them perform. I'd heard around town the performance would be a showstopper. I'd heard the Society was amazing, drawing professional vocal talent from all over the world. I'd

even heard this particular performance would feature two professional orchestras and a children's chorus. I'd heard all of this and yet I was attending simply to support a friend in the ensemble, and expected little more than a night of silenced emails and polite applause for a friend who had worked very hard to prepare for the Society's performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Matthäus-Passion*, or St. Matthew Passion.

How little I understood about the Handel Society of Dartmouth College.



The Society was founded in 1807 by John Hubbard, a professor of mathematics and philosophy, in order to "promote the cause of true and genuine sacred music" amidst the rapidly changing musical tastes of an emerging American sacred music scene. Hubbard and the Society wanted to preserve a place for European composers, and specifically the Baroque masters, among the "unworthy" offerings of early American composers. As Hubbard and the Society felt the works of George Frederic Handel best exemplified the worth and quality of European sacred music, Handel's name was adopted by the Society for the ensemble.



Handel Society rehearsal, 1967

Originally, the Society was strictly a choral group, populated by male members of the Dartmouth community. Eventually, the group began including "honorary" members of the community in its choral and instrumental ranks. As the religious >>>>

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For more information about the Handel Society, visit [www.handelsociety.org](http://www.handelsociety.org)





Director Arnold Kvam (above) conducting the Messiah in 1947 (below).



climate of the United States ebbed and flowed, so, too, did the membership and activities of the Handel Society.

The Society strayed from its roots in the 1930s when its conductor, Maurice Longhurst, included works such as those of Gilbert and Sullivan in the Society's repertoire (one has to imagine that Hubbard would not have approved), but the Society revisited its roots in the 1940s when its director, Arnold Kvam, returned to large orchestral works.

After a rocky and unsettled period during the 1960s and 1970s, when the Society fell into obscurity and was nearly consigned to the annals of Dartmouth history, Melinda O'Neal arrived on the Dartmouth College campus as choral conductor. She enthusiastically revitalized the Society and served as its spiritual and musical leader until 2004.

#### TODAY'S SOCIETY

Today's Handel Society has grown in number and reputation under the leadership of Dr. Robert Duff. Dr. Duff is eminently qualified to lead the Society into the future, as he holds degrees in conducting, piano and voice from the Univer-



Melinda O'Neal

sity of Massachusetts at Amherst, Temple University and the University of Southern California. He served as director of music for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, where he oversaw and directed the musical programming for 300 parishes. He served as councilor to the New Hampshire Council on the Arts, and is president of the Eastern Division of the American Choral Directors Association.

Every September, Dr. Duff auditions all 100 singers, as every member of the Society is required to re-audition annually for their place in the ensemble.

Which brings me back to my friend. Every audition season, she confides her fear that this year, finally, Dr. Duff will realize she has never been worthy to fill her seat among the sopranos, and every year her fears are unfounded. She prepares for her audition with the zeal of a new convert, and depending on her performance during the audition, awaits news of her place in the Society with great excitement and fear.

As the ensemble filed out on stage, I immediately understood why I had not seen my friend in the months leading up to this performance of *Matthäus-Passion*. Certainly, I'd been aware she had dis-

*An evening with the Handel Society is an education in quality music, professional commitment to a craft, and the tradition of Dartmouth College's musical history.*

appeared into some vortex of musical anxiety that had left her kids motherless and her friend confidanteless in the weeks before the performance. As she stood among the sopranos, slightly aglitter in her Society-approved black outfit, beaming with pride and excitement, I knew I was in for something special — not just



Dr. Robert Duff leads the Society today.

because I was going to be a part of the music that takes over her world, but because the Society was being revealed to me as the local treasure it is.

The *Matthäus-Passion* is long, as are many of the Society's concerts, and the program instructs the audience to withhold their applause until the end of Part II, as is the tradition of secular music. This request, however, went by the wayside when the audience was stunned into accidentally applauding by the grace and beauty of the music after the third section of Part I. Even the members of the audience who were able to keep the Society's edict in mind fell into applause at the sight of the children's choir, who filled the aisles with the light of their candles and their voices, singing with precision and heart.

The soloists were well chosen and eminently qualified for their challenging roles in the work, but the true heart of the Society lies in the practiced hands of Dr. Duff and in the confident voices of his singers. An evening with the Handel Society is an education in quality music, professional commitment to a craft, and the tradition of Dartmouth College's musical history.

This season, the Handel Society will take on Mozart's *Mass in C Minor*, and I

will be there to watch my friend perform once again. This time, I will listen from a place of education and appreciation for my good fortune. The Handel Society is a rare beast in a culture of immediate gratification and sound bites. A performance requires patience, total immersion, and attention to the details that elevate music to the level of art. I have no doubt that John Hubbard would feel just as I did when I heard the opening strains of the chorus in Part I, "*Kommt. Ihr Töchter, helft mir kagen.*" UVL

#### Mark Your Calendar

This May, be sure to attend the ensemble's performance of Mozart, and experience the magic of The Handel Society. Leave your cell phone at home, tell the babysitter you won't be home until late, and give yourself over to the music and tradition of the oldest student, faculty, staff and community organization in the United States devoted to the performance of choral-orchestral works.

#### Handel Society of Dartmouth College sings Mozart's Mass in C Minor

Saturday, May 17, 8 p.m.

Sunday, May 18, 2 p.m.

Mozart never finished this mass. Fortunately for us, the brilliant Harvard pianist and scholar Robert Levin did in 2005 ("a glorious, fully Mozartean vision of a complete Mass...as inspired a guess as we're likely to hear" — *The New York Times*). Dartmouth's 100-voice town-gown chorus is joined by guest soloists. Robert Duff is the director.

>> Spaulding Auditorium, Hopkins Center for the Arts, East Wheelock Street, Hanover, N.H.

>> Adults, \$15; Dartmouth students, \$5; youth, \$10

>> [www.Hop.dartmouth.edu](http://www.Hop.dartmouth.edu) or (603) 646-2422

