

by Margaret W. Miller
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ON MOZART,
PILATES, AND
MARISA
TOMEI



In January 2001, internationally renowned musician, pianist and choral conductor Craig Hella Johnson was named director of the Houston Masterworks Chorus. Here's a glimpse into the artistic intelligence of a conductor whose work reviewers have praised as flawless, intense, captivating and inspired.

MW: How does the human voice compare with other instruments?

CHJ: There's a unique aspect to singing, which is that our instrument is inside our bodies and so we can't see it. I can say to an orchestra member, "Be sure you press a little deeper in the 3rd valve. Change your reed. Lift your wrist." But as a choral director I can't say to a singer, "Your larynx is this way and it needs to move that way." Good singing is ultimately one of the most natural acts. But for the most part, this is an instrument that's internal. So we have to find ways to get at that issue.

MW: Those of us who work with you are amused and compelled by your suggestions to "become a 'Pigpen' of breath..." or "give the music some ankle boots." How did you discover the effectiveness of metaphor in working with singers?

CHJ: As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. With singers who are using their bodies, being able to "physicalize" that musical gesture is the key. There's a sense of urgency when metaphors start coming out. I could leave it before that point and say, "Oh well, it's not happening." The metaphor is the next attempt to say, "Nope, I believe it's in you. Let's just dig for it."

MW: While many choral conductors are critical and faultfinding, your style is gracious and supportive, even when singers aren't performing up to par. Is this a strategic decision or is it your natural bent?

CHJ: There's nothing more fun than to be in a rehearsal where you're being called forth to do your best work. I don't want to create an environment of fear. I'm clear that I demand a lot. But I choose not to do that in a way that's disrespectful, or jarring, or at all brutal. I like the invitational approach.

MW: Do you have a routine you go through before a performance?

CHJ: The most important thing for me is quiet. I very much need that half-hour before the concert begins to sit quietly and gather my thoughts and get back into the music which we're about. The other requirement is physical: I really need to stretch. I do Pilates exercises before and afterwards.

December 15 - The Ambassador's Club Christmas took place at the Twelve Spot. Many local celebrities and models participated in the fashion show with the Veneto Collection

MW: Auditions are held each summer for new HMC members. What do you listen for in these sessions?

CHJ: I want to hear that someone can identify intervals. It's very important that a singer be able to read music or be willing to learn. I also look for a combination of intelligence and a healthy sense of self.

MW: Why should someone who's never attended a choral concert buy a ticket for the February HMC performance?

CHJ: Why do we pass on a great novel, whether it's contemporary or classic? I'd be frustrated if a friend of mine were performing an extraordinary piece, such as the Mozart Requiem, and didn't do whatever it took to get me to that concert. We've got to bring people around to a place of greater participation and help listeners know about the important role they play in this art form.

MW: What about a reader who thinks, "Well, I could just buy the CD. Why should I spend the money to go sit in a room where it's happening in the moment?"

CHJ: Well, because this music was written for the room and for the moment when it's actually happening. A live performance is all about being with other people, about coming into a crowded hall and touching another person's humanity. You see 100 people agreeing to take a breath at the same time. It's amazing. What a way to get in touch with being part of the human community.

MW: What do you do for fun?

CHJ: Movies, movies, movies! I love being with friends. I love to read. Right now I'm reading *The Spell of the Sensuous*, by David Abram. I'm also a runner, off and on. I ran a marathon a few years ago.

MW: If you could invite two people to dinner (living or not), who would they be?

CHJ: I have such a long list! One would be Marisa Tomei. I think she's an actress who's just beginning to reveal her layers. I'd also love to have Hafiz, the Sufi poet. Actually, if I could have Hafiz and Rumi and Rilke all at the same table, that would be my dream . . . and Marisa Tomei.

HMC performances cover the entire range of the choral repertoire from classical to contemporary. For tickets to the all-Mozart performance on February 16, call 713-529-8900.

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