

A Fight for Culture During the Pandemic

by Jen Pearl

Soprano Jen Pearl is a founder of the Boston Schiller Institute Chorus. She is a Conductor of, and serves as the Chair of the Schiller Institute NYC Chorus.

Dec. 6—On Thursday, December 17 at 7:30 pm, the Schiller Institute NYC (SINYC) Chorus will present a live-streamed concert to [celebrate](#) Beethoven's 250th birthday, which will feature both recorded and live performances. This concert will serve as a culmination, reminder, and reflection of the chorus members' relentless determination to continue a mission of working on and spreading beautiful, uplifting music to a nation and a world that is desperately in need of a response to the tumultuous and difficult condition of our nation, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and economic and social breakdown. The chorus has continued to work on and perform (virtually) Classical music's greatest choral work, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, a mission taken up before the March 2020 lockdown.

In a recently released 14-minute [documentary](#) on the Schiller Chorus, Diane Sare, founder, Conductor, and Chair Emeritus of the SINYC Chorus, encapsulated this idea:

People want to do something beautiful for mankind. I think one of the things that compels people to join our chorus is that they have a sense that they need sanctuary, something beautiful in this crazy world of ours, but also, what a great gift to be part of something beautiful, to be part of something where the whole is far greater than the sum of the parts.

The Founding and Mission of the Schiller Chorus

In 2014, Lyndon LaRouche launched the Manhattan Project, with the conception that a political and cultural breakthrough in the United States and the world could not come from the stultified and controlled dynamic of the Washington, D.C. beltway bureaucracy, but had to be spear-headed instead from the culturally rich, wildly diverse City of New York. A big part of that intervention was the creation and founding of a community

chorus, which LaRouche tasked to have 1,500 singers!

On December 20, 2014 at a sing-along performance of excerpts of Handel's *Messiah*, the Schiller Institute NYC chorus was born. The concert had been organized in answer to the outrage over the Staten Island Grand Jury decision on the death-by-suffocation of Eric Garner, which had come in the wake of the Ferguson, Missouri riots that followed the killing of an unarmed African-American teenager, and which threatened to create dangerous divisions and violence in the City of New York. The concert was dedicated to "The Sanctity of Every Human Life."

Shortly after that concert, the Manhattan Chorus began holding weekly rehearsals in whatever space could be found. In March 2016, the SINYC Chorus, joined by friends from New Jersey, Boston, and Vir-



Courtesy of Jen Pearl

Jen Pearl conducts a joint performance with the Jena Jubilee Singers from Jena, Germany in Quincy, Massachusetts in October 2019.

ginia, was able to perform the entire [Easter section](#) of the *Messiah* with a chorus of over 80 members, and a professional orchestra and soloists. Thereafter, Schiller Institute choruses in Boston, Virginia, and New York grew, giving concerts, hosting lectures on the principles of music, and participating in important musical interventions around the country.

Suddenly, in March of 2020, due to the pandemic, the New York City, Boston and Virginia choruses had to quickly shift all weekly sectionals and rehearsals online, and since that time we have produced six virtual chorus performances, three of which will be featured in the Thursday, December 17, 2020 Beethoven Celebration concert. (Click [here](#) for tickets and more information.)

In the recently released, 14-minute documentary, our

Principal Conductor and Vice-Chair, John Sigerson, said:

The chorus is totally unique in the completely wide variety of people that are in it. It's a very good reflection of the actual composition of the New York City area, which has every type of person: every age, young people, working people, professionals, some very skilled professionals, other people who come in and have absolutely no experience with singing whatsoever but are excited about the idea, because unlike many of the choruses in New York City, we do not have auditions for people. If someone wants to participate in this beautiful music, we work with them.

Boston chorus member Cher Jordan put it this way:

There are people who are professional, semi-professional, and then there were people like us who just needed to sing as a way of expression. And so we started attending and then all these new things that come to you, a lot of structure. [We are] given historical information about the music which is denied to people now if they are not on the track of being a professional musician.

The *Missa Solemnis* and the Rehearsal Process

The challenge and beauty of singing in a chorus, or the “choral principle” as developed by Lyndon LaRouche, is that every voice becomes part of something bigger than each individual's self. Within each choral section, each singer, however experienced he or she may be, can both depend upon and tune the ear to the other singers and other sections.

The first roadblock that came up with having to shift to online rehearsals in March was that the singers are sitting in their own homes, singing completely by themselves! Furthermore, when it came time to put together a “performance,” each singer had to record his or her own voice singing the entire movement along with a digitally-produced, pre-recorded orchestral backtrack! This presented many challenges to our diverse group of singers, but people rose to the occasion, demonstrating an intense commitment to, and understanding of the mission of our chorus.

In the recently released documentary, SINYC chorus Alto Section member Yvonne May summed it up beautifully:

The thing I like about the Schiller Institute chorus is that here we do not only sing the great masterpieces of Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, etc., we also

sing African American Spiritual songs and also the special projects. We recently finished the “Defend the Yellow River” [event](#). All these cultural activities reflect the Schiller Institute's principle of promoting world peace and harmonization of the human society as one race. So, through the singing activity, it gives me a higher sense of purpose and brings me to a higher level of choral singing.

“Defend the Yellow River” is one movement of the *Yellow River Cantata*, written in 1939 to rally support across China for the war against the Japanese invasion, and is beloved of the Chinese people. The SINYC Chorus performed this piece, virtually, in Chinese, in celebration of the 75th Anniversary of V-J Day, 1945, dedicated to the Chinese sacrifices in that war.

Earlier, in celebration of the 75th Anniversary of the meeting of U.S. and Soviet Union troops at the Elbe River, and of V-E Day, 1945, the Chorus performed “Tri Tankista,” The Three Tankmen, written during the Russo-Japanese War, but sung across the Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War (World War II). We sang it in Russian, and it was received with joy and appreciation in Russia, with hundreds of thousands of [views](#).

The *Missa Solemnis* and the Future

Although there is much upheaval and uncertainty going into the New Year, the Schiller choruses are fully committed to continuing to work on the *Missa Solemnis*, with the tentative goal of performing it live for the twentieth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks. No other choral work could be more appropriate, in that, according to Schiller chorus conductor John Sigerson:

Beethoven wrote this piece in the wake of the most brutal upheavals in European history, which was the period of the Napoleonic wars. It was a political intervention, but not from the standpoint of political parties, but from the standpoint of policy: What is the policy on which nations and human beings should base their relations? That was his concern. And that's why the *Missa Solemnis* and the *9th Symphony*—but I think the *Missa Solemnis* is a special work, because, although it brings back the past from the Catholic Mass, which goes back centuries, millennia, but it also looks toward the future.

Please [join](#) us on Thursday, December 17 at 7:30 pm, and join the chorus!