

# KAISER'S 20TH

FOR 20 SEASONS, ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY CHORUS DIRECTOR  
AMY KAISER HAS KEPT HER FOCUS ON MUSICAL COLLABORATIONS.

BY RENÉ SPENCER SALLER



GERTY LOVE

Amy Kaiser

David Robertson met Amy Kaiser in January of 1999, before his St. Louis Symphony debut as guest conductor. On the program was Ravel's ballet *Daphnis and Chloé*. He came to the chorus rehearsal straight from the hotel, before he had met anyone from the orchestra or staff—hardly anyone at all, in fact, besides the driver. If Robertson had been at all apprehensive about his first time leading the St. Louis Symphony, a few minutes of watching Kaiser at work with the chorus eased his nerves: “I was so impressed with her passion, her sense of joy in the music, yet her incredible, just iron-fisted attention to detail and perfection,” he remembers.

Kaiser was equally impressed with the young conductor: “He almost danced the piece. It was a very electrifying thing.”

She recalls being a bit nervous before the first concert because the chorus hadn't had the opportunity to rehearse the ending—a brilliant and rather tricky choral flourish—with the orchestra. It came off without a hitch. It was a good omen, if you believe in such things. Five years later, Robertson was named St. Louis Symphony Music Director.

This is the 20th-anniversary season for Kaiser, who moved from New York to accept the position of St. Louis Symphony Chorus Director. “I went from freelancing in the middle of Manhattan to being a full-time chorus director here, in

the suburbs, in a totally different kind of life,” the Brooklyn native explains. “It was a big adjustment, of course, but a lot of it was really wonderful. It’s home now. A big part of that is the pleasure of working with this chorus and this orchestra and being part of this community—the musical community and the greater community.”

When she left New York, Gerard Schwarz, Music Director of the New York Chamber Symphony, called her departure a loss to the city, adding that she was “certainly among the best choral directors in the country.” Twenty years later, her colleagues in St. Louis all concur. St. Louis Symphony Chorus Manager Susan Patterson, who also sings in the alto section, calls her “a very skilled conductor with a sharp ear for language and style.” Patterson notes that she “is easy to follow and clear with her musical indications, and she makes an in-depth study of any work we are tasked with performing.”

Chorus member Patricia Kofron praises Kaiser for her absolute devotion to the music and her generosity in sharing her considerable knowledge: “We use piano reductions, but she will stop and point out what the orchestra is doing (or not doing) while we are singing a passage, who is playing, what the composer is trying to convey, taking us on a journey along with the composer and orchestra, making us more involved in the entire piece. Rather than slapping two halves of the whole together, as some chorus masters seem to do, we are integrated into the total. It’s not us, the singers, and them, the orchestra.”

Kaiser knows her chorus as intimately as she knows the score, which means that no one feels safe slacking. “It’s remarkable that she knows the individual voices of 130 singers,” Kofron marvels. “She can pick out who she is hearing even when we’re all singing. Sometimes that can be a bad thing if you’re the one who is on the wrong note or making a less than desirable sound.”

Although Kaiser can be very demanding, the singers understand that it’s always in the service of the music, not of anyone’s ego. “It’s my job,” Kaiser explains, “to constantly refine the performance and make it sound better and more musical. This is something that we do right to the end, and it’s not personal. We’re still working on a piece after the first performance, through to the next performance, making it a little stronger here, or accenting that note there. I don’t see it in any way as demoralizing. Everyone in the St. Louis Symphony Chorus understands that we’re working at the highest level.

“I do tell them plenty of things they need to do,” she admits with a chuckle. “You need to emphasize this and not that. Breathe here and not there. We work a lot on vowels, sound, color, phrasing. We spent a lot of time on the German language when preparing Brahms’s *Ein deutsches Requiem* with [guest conductor] Markus Stenz.”

Beyond her scrupulous attention to the score and text, Kaiser wants each singer to deliver the best possible performance. To ensure this, she might use an analogy, comparing a light and floaty passage to a silk chiffon scarf. She might



Love at first rehearsal: Amy Kaiser and David Robertson

## Kaiser's 20th

divide the chorus into quartets for rehearsal so that the singers can hear themselves in various combinations instead of following other members in their section. She might demonstrate a sudden decrescendo in Beethoven's Mass in C by showing the singers how to make their bodies big and then small—whatever it takes to get the idea across. “What you want to do is engage everyone so that the singing becomes alive and expressive and personally felt,” she says. “It should never be merely accurate or merely beautiful.”

Like all the best teachers, Kaiser doesn't instruct so much as model and inspire. “They may be learning, but I'm not teaching,” she insists. “I'm glad that they're learning, but the idea is that it is a musical rehearsal, an exploration of a great musical work. I think my role is to facilitate the music to appear. The music has many possibilities. I create an environment in which people can learn, but they're really not being taught.”

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Robertson points to Kaiser's consummate musicianship as one of the reasons he chose to join the St. Louis musical community. “It has been reinforced every single time I've worked with her,” he says, “whether it's the precise diction of 120 people all singing the same consonant the same way at exactly the same time, or whether it's coming in with just the right thing to make the intonation or the quality of a phrase unforgettable. She has such a wealth of knowledge and technique that she brings to the choral experience, while never losing sight of the fact that this music is there to move us and take us places that we couldn't go without it.”

Kaiser's close and collaborative relationship with Robertson has resulted in many career highlights. Most recently, the *New York Times* listed their Carnegie Hall performance of Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* as one of the top five classical concerts of 2013. This season, in addition to another trip to Carnegie (performing Meredith Monk's *Weave* and Debussy's *Nocturnes*), she anticipates still more milestones, including the first-ever performances by the St. Louis Symphony and Chorus of Beethoven's Mass in C and Verdi's opera *Aida*.

The prestigious premieres and critical accolades are gratifying, of course, but it's the day-to-day work of leading a chorus that Kaiser most enjoys. “Every Tuesday night—rehearsal night—is a pleasure,” she says. “I felt that way when I started here 20 years ago, and I still feel that way now. It's wonderful to have a group of singers so vocally capable. They have the high notes, they have the low notes, they know how the music is supposed to go, and they can count: All those things help me focus on a musical collaboration.”

*The St. Louis Symphony and Chorus perform  
Beethoven's Mass in C, January 23-24, 2015.*

*René Spencer Saller is a St. Louis-based freelance writer.*