

Capturing the Human Experience

University Welcomes Megill as Director of Choral Activities

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To Andrew Megill, music encapsulates the human experience. This experience began in Megill's childhood when he and his family gathered around the piano to sing hymns and barbershop quartets. Growing up, Megill spent his youth overseas living in Sierra Leone and Bangkok, Thailand, where his parents were medical missionaries, his father specializing in tropical medicine. In these regions music, instruments, and scores

were virtually inaccessible, so choral singing was emphasized.

"I think it drew me to ensemble music-making because it was a familial activity and it was something that we did that sort of defined who we were as a unit," Megill said. "So I think I've always been drawn to the idea of ensemble music-making as a thing that bonds people together and draws people together, makes us aware of our common humanity."

Megill's childhood experiences helped define who he is as a teacher and a musician, shaped his future musical experiences, and developed his ideas regarding the purpose and meaning of music. As the new director of choral activities and professor of conducting at the University of Illinois, Megill will use these ideas to continue preserving our illustrious past but also reviving aspects to propel the program into the future.

Though his early training is in singing, Megill didn't always see himself performing or conducting professional choruses. When his family moved back to the US, Megill began playing viola and piano but continued to sing. He originally planned to study viola in college, but he constantly found himself gravitating back to choral music. Upon graduation, Megill knew he wanted to be a conductor, but the University of New Mexico did not offer such a degree. Instead, he pursued composition.

"I knew that I wasn't particularly gifted as a composer, but it seemed to me that of all the degrees available as an undergraduate, the one that would teach me the most about how music worked. Learning about it from

"Choral music is one of the ways in which human beings can find this sort of paradoxical and miraculous connection between complete individuality and complete connecting."



Jeffrey Magge

Charlotte Mattax Moersch and Andrew Megill after the Allerton Music Barn Festival in 2014. Mattax Moersch taught Megill harpsichord while he was a student at Rutgers.



inside out, and I thought it might be the closest thing to conducting and I'm very happy with that decision," Megill said.

Upon graduation, he moved to the East Coast where he earned his Master's Degree at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, NJ, which is regarded as an important center for choral singing. Approximately 600 students attend the college and all participate in choirs daily. As a student Megill had the opportunity to work with illustrious conductors including Robert Shaw and UI alumnus Joseph Flummerfelt.

Soon after graduation, he became adjunct assistant professor at Westminster before beginning his DMA at Rutgers. In 1996 he became associate professor of conducting and held the position until Spring 2014. During that period, his professional career blossomed beyond campus, too, as he enjoyed preparing choruses for the likes of major conductors and orchestras such as the Cleveland Orchestra, Dresden Philharmonic, Montreal Symphony, National Symphony, and New York Philharmonic and leading full ensembles at the Carmel Bach Festival and the Montreal Symphony, where he'll make his debut in December 2014. Just before arriving on campus in the fall, he served as Chorusmaster for Montreal Symphony, preparing an ensemble of 1,500 singers to perform *Carmina Burana* for an audience of 40,000.

In total, Megill spent 27 years on the Westminster campus, which made the decision to leave the place where he grew up musically very difficult. With his previous position Megill said he felt as if he were going through the motions: he knew what problems would arise and how to fix them. But accepting the position at the University of Illinois presented him with a number of new challenges and opportunities to grow.

"The UI gave me a chance to have a different balance for that and to come to a place where I felt challenged. I'm incredibly excited about the potential for continuing the extraordinary legacy of choral music here, but it also does seem to me to be a risk," Megill said. "When you can't take risks, you stop growing, so this opportunity seemed like a chance where I could do something really important or fail spectacularly."

In his new position as Director of Choral Activities, Megill is responsible for directing two choirs (Chamber Singers and Oratorio Society) and overseeing the other directors and choirs. The choirs will prepare for individual

concerts but will have several opportunities to perform as a large group. For instance, in April 2015, Megill will lead all choirs and an orchestra in a concert that includes part of Mozart's *Requiem*, Vaughan Williams's *Dona nobis pacem*, and Bach's *Dona nobis pacem* from the B minor mass. The centerpiece of the concert is *Of War* by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Louis Spratlan, which was commissioned for Megill's appointment here and written for Chamber Singers, Oratorio Society, and orchestra.

As far as choosing repertoire, Megill's taste is rather eclectic so audiences can expect fairly diverse concerts often with new and unfamiliar repertoire. He also strives to unite various musical styles under an overarching theme. For example, the theme of the first fall Chamber Singers concert was the four seasons, so Megill selected music by Brahms, Debussy, Delius, and several madrigals with texts that correspond to this topic.

Another aspect of Megill's new position is developing a vision of what the choral division can be. This involves latching onto UI's history but also finding areas, such as outreach engagements, in which to breathe new life. Megill wants to start by reconnecting to three constituency groups that are naturally a part of the School of Music: Illinois public schools, the University as a whole, and alumni. Already, he has agreed to conduct the Illinois All-State Honors Choir and would like to plan workshops for high school students. Though many non-music majors audition for choral ensembles at the start of the semester, Megill would like to increase the numbers and reach out to students who might not consider themselves singers.

"Choral music has a unique opportunity to reach the amateurs," Megill said. "Everyone whether they have studied the violin or bassoon or not, all secretly sing in the shower. There is a way in which people can be artists without years of private lessons or training."

To Megill, it is also crucial to connect to the UI's long and illustrious list of alumni who continue to have a great influence on the choral music world. Megill hopes to bring alumni in to do residencies or even Skype sessions with students.

"Just to connect to that alumni base seems to me to be the right thing to do on every level," Megill said. "It will make my students and me learn more because we will be connected to these people who have such extraordinary life experiences. It will help the world remember how deep the experience can be here at the University of Illinois and bring in great students."