

# 'You have to teach what's around you'



TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

Stephanie Martin directs the Pax Christi Chorale in rehearsal April 20, 2009, at Grace Church-on-the-Hill. They'll perform Bach's Mass in B minor this weekend.

## Community-minded Pax Christi director Stephanie Martin gets her big Bach break

Apr 23, 2009 04:30 AM

[Be the first to comment on this article...](#)

**JOHN TERAUDS**

CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC, TORONTO STAR

In a world awash in distractions, Stephanie Martin is passionate in her defence of the enduring value of community music-making. What it may lack in glamour, it compensates with something else.

"You can talk about relevancy, popularity or seeming to be relevant," says the church organist, choir director, harpsichord master and York University professor in a North Toronto living room where books and music scores threaten to topple from every surface. "What's relevant about what I do is there are these groups of people that gather every week and they create these amazing works of art.

"The sense of community that comes out of singing choral music or singing in a church choir – that's irreplaceable. If that's not relevant, I don't know what is."

Martin is about to realize a dream this weekend, as the Pax Christi Chorale, which she directs, performs Johann Sebastian Bach's monumental *Mass in B Minor* at Grace Church-on-the-Hill.

"Now, at age 47, I'm finally getting to conduct it with professional voices and a full orchestra," she says. The soloists include young Canadian Opera Company regular, soprano Virginia Hatfield.

In the course of the interview, it eventually becomes clear that this Bach Mass is a particularly sweet event. She has always wanted to conduct it, perhaps because she would have first heard it in her mother's womb.

"My mother was singing in it and my father was directing," Martin recalls. "They worked on it for about a year, and my mother would have been in a happy place at that time."

The Pax Christi Chorale was founded 22 years ago as a largely Mennonite group, although there are no restrictions on who can audition to sing. Martin, who grew up in a Mennonite family, became its music director 13 years ago.

"Everyone sings. You're not ashamed of it. You just sing," she says of the emphasis on communal music-making.

As a girl, Martin recalls, "I always imagined how nice it would be to make a living playing the harpsichord and organ and writing little pieces for a choir." Her voice trails off for a moment. "I guess if you imagine yourself doing something for long enough, then you eventually end up doing it. That's how it's turned out."

Besides keeping alive a Mennonite commitment to music, Martin juggles several other important traditions in her various jobs.

As music director at the Church of St. Mary Magdalene, she upholds ritual and musical traditions begun there by composer and longtime music director Healey Willan.

At York University, where she says she has taught at least 20 different courses as well as harpsichord and organ, she tries to raise the awareness among her pupils of more recent local heroes.

Martin tells how her students this year hadn't heard of Richard Bradshaw and his accomplishments with the opera house and inaugurating it with Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle operas. "It's an amazing Toronto story," she says.

She returns to 20th-century legacies: "No one will know about Healey Willan if we don't embrace the heritage that we have around us. Wherever you are in the world, you have to teach what's around you.

"Canadians are loath to celebrate our heroes. In Britain, you have the Elgar Society and the Finzi Society where everyone will gather around this great figure and celebrate their achievements. Here, we're kind of, 'Yeah, we've heard of him, but we've never heard his music.'"

Asked if there's a secret to engaging her students, Martin says that it's the same force all musicians need to nurture all the time: a love of what they're doing. "Otherwise it would be like cooking and serving something that you wouldn't eat yourself."

---

Just the facts

**WHAT:** Pax Christi Chorale and guests

**WHERE:** Grace Church-on-the-Hill, 300 Lonsdale Rd.

**WHEN:** Saturday at 7:30 p.m., Sunday at 3 p.m.

**TICKETS:** \$5-\$30 at 416-491-8542