

## MOUNT DESERT SUMMER CHORALE, Winter 2023

### A VIEW FROM THE PODIUM

We've finished another rewarding season, and we're doing worthwhile work as we slowly reenter the world after COVID. But there are challenges.

For the last three seasons, we've spent more money than we've taken in, to the tune of around \$10,000 per year. That's not surprising: people are reluctant to rejoin singing groups and audiences are cautious about returning to crowded spaces. Our numbers everywhere are down—choir participation, donors, advertisers, and audience members. I am convinced, however, that this will all improve, if gradually.

Even though income has fallen short of spending, I hasten to add that WE ARE NOT IN DEBT! Thanks to sound fiscal management by the board, we have been able to use carryovers and payments from our investment funds to cover the shortfalls. But we can't do this forever.

Our challenge is to remain viable and flexible as things recover—but we must also adapt to changing circumstances. Let's look at each of these in turn, and then I will propose possible ways to meet these challenges.

### MEMBERS

We are fortunate to have a core of very faithful members who sing year after year. This forms the foundation of our group: every person who comes and sings contributes significantly to the whole, and we value one another deeply. The challenge is to keep that faithful core and to add to it with people equally committed and capable. One obstacle? The cost of staying for weeks on or near Mount Desert Island is becoming prohibitive. I used to be able to rent housing for the summer for around \$2000. Now, about 20 years later, it costs nearly that for a week. There used to be a bit left over from my stipend after I paid for rent; now the stipend doesn't cover the full rental bill. Year-round residents are similarly challenged. We used to have at least a small contingent of student singers, but as young people take demanding summer jobs with long hours, they have less flexibility to commit to our rehearsal schedule. Adults with full-time jobs are similarly overextended in the summer.

Why do participation numbers matter? The more singers we have, the more solid we are musically. We are more likely to be a balanced group, and we're more likely to have the forces we need to sing the major works that are at the heart of our mission. But there's also a direct correlation between the number of singers and the numbers in all the other areas: more singers mean more audience members, more donations, and more advertisers. Is it possible to have too many singers? Yes, but we're nowhere near that limit!

### DONORS

As visits to Mount Desert Island have changed, so has our donor base. Even when I took over in 1999, summer residency was transforming. Fewer and fewer people were spending all summer on MDI. Even then, the island was less and less a summer haven for people from major cities who felt a responsibility to fund arts organizations. When I took over, names like Ford, Kellogg, Astor, and Rockefeller dominated our donor rolls. I remember seeing "Martha Stewart" on a donor list my first year and remarking, "I'll bet she gets teased," thinking it was someone who shared a name with a celebrity. Turns out that \$25 a year donor was THE Martha Stewart.

We created the Fund for the Future partly to address a changing donor base. We have succeeded in maintaining a steady stream of contributions, but they aren't keeping up with costs. Still, if we could make up for just this season's shortfall, we would be back on solid ground. More about that in a moment.

## **ADVERTISERS**

We are enduring one of the toughest business climates we've seen in many decades. There is deep uncertainty, and that makes it hard for businesses to plan and to commit to things like program ads. And let's face it: if you're trying to survive as a business, advertising in the MDSC program isn't your highest priority. Again, we have loyal advertisers who have been our mainstay. But it's hard to keep up with businesses that close, new businesses that open, and staying in contact with the ones that continue. Our ad revenues these last few seasons have been about half what they were at their peak.

## **AUDIENCE MEMBERS**

Our audiences have been small. Again, I attribute this mostly to the pandemic and people's reluctance to be in large crowds. This is recovering more quickly in some areas than in others: playoff baseball games had over 50,000 people in attendance. Taylor Swift, Harry Styles, and their like can pack stadiums. Few if any of these audience members are wearing masks, and they're all screaming at the top of their lungs. It's possible that classical music audiences are more cautious for a variety of reasons, and that may explain why audiences for concerts like ours are recovering slowly. Having a larger choir would help, but we have to think of further strategies to improve attendance.

## **OTHER CHALLENGES**

Changing climate, changing demographics, and various other limitations create obstacles. Some members will recall that it was so warm around concert time in 2018 and 2019 that both choir members and audience members fainted from the heat. We explored air conditioning Saint Saviour's temporarily, but the cost was prohibitive, even if the logistics could be solved (noise was a consideration). Saint Saviour's was virtually shut to outside activities once the pandemic hit, so we had to look for alternate space. The Criterion is more costly, but it has the advantage of being air conditioned. That said, it poses other challenges.

What are the alternatives? MDI is a very small place. There aren't many facilities that can hold a choir, an orchestra, and a decent-sized audience. Add in the need for good acoustics, good sight lines, and possibly air conditioning, and you see that the options are few indeed!

## **WHAT LEADERSHIP IS DOING**

How are we addressing these challenges?

Extending our outreach to Ellsworth is a major initiative. This gives us a wider base of people who might sing donate, advertise, and attend concerts. Ellsworth High School is a nice place to perform with plenty of parking, comfortable seating, and good acoustics. We had a modest audience this year, but we think we can do a great deal better through targeted effort. I feel—and the board agrees with me—that broadening our base provides the possibility of becoming more sustainable. I don't think the name Mount Desert Summer Chorale limits us to MDI. And while we clearly have a home on MDI and remain based there, I don't believe it prevents us from reaching out beyond the island.

The board is spending the off-season cleaning up and expanding our lists of potential donors and advertisers. We are developing strategies for recruiting new members, and we are working on ways to attract audience members. We are also open to your ideas and suggestions, recognizing that the status quo—how we've always done it—is no longer fully viable.

We've also made some decisions about repertory and personnel that you have told us will help. And of course, we are always vigilant about costs. But like everything else, the cost of operating the Mount Desert Summer Chorale keeps going up.

## **WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

Choir members can have a role in everything that generates revenue. And to put it bluntly, if we don't find ways to address our challenges, there won't be a Summer Chorale for much longer. (We could exist for 5 years—10 at the most—if we changed nothing and just spent down our assets. That would be a shame.) If you value the chance to sing in this group, we hope you will want to help it to continue.

### **Membership: Recruit!**

The most important – and possibly the easiest – thing you can do is talk up your experience in MDSC. Tell friends about it! Tell them how they can be involved. Invite your friends who sing to come with you to a rehearsal. Join the Facebook page and share the posts. Make people aware of MDSC whenever and however you can.

### **Donors and Advertisers: Give us names!**

What businesses do you frequent? Are they already advertising in our program? If not, send us the information. Same with donors. Do you know people who love great music and who might support it? Let us know! You can always send us information via email: [summerchorale@gmail.com](mailto:summerchorale@gmail.com). This is an ongoing effort—no time like the present to send us prospects. If you're not sure whether someone is on our list or not, send us the information. We can easily sort out duplicates.

### **Audience: Talk it up!**

The best way to attract audience members is for those participating to invite them. People go to events in which they have a personal investment. They'll come to support friends and family. So make sure everyone in your wide circle knows about MDSC and about our concerts. Mention it at your church and civic groups, in your book club, in your hiking group. Be sure everyone you know, even slightly, is aware that you sing in a choir. They will be impressed, I assure you!

This summer, based on feedback from members, we're using two prominent local singers as our soloists. Josh Miller will be our baritone, and Bronwyn Kortge will be our soprano. Many of you felt that having local soloists would attract an audience. So let's make it so! Get the audience there! 😊

We're also doing the Fauré Requiem because there was sentiment among choir members that this would be more satisfying to sing and would be more attractive to the audience than something like *Pirates of Penzance*. Again, let's make it so! 😊

## **ONE MORE WAY TO HELP**

You knew this was coming—there's a way you can help financially. But I want to emphasize two things: 1) Not everyone has the resources to make significant financial contributions, and 2) money alone won't make our enterprise thrive. No one is obligated to give money, and we value and respect all members, whether they are donors or not. Even if you give money, I hope you will consider being involved in other ways beyond donating.

### **Here's the ask: Become a supporting member of MDSC**

[The PayPal giving site for MDSC](#) has a way to make a monthly contribution to the Chorale. Enter an amount—say \$10—at the top. PayPal will suggest an additional amount that will cover the fees. We hope you will choose that option so that MDSC can benefit from the full donation. Decide where you want the money to go—“General Fund” means the money is immediately available to meet costs. Then check “Make this a monthly donation.” PayPal will automatically charge whatever method you choose once each month. It's that simple. I donate monthly to both the General Fund and the Fund for the Future.

**If you sign up to make a monthly donation of \$10 or more by March 1, 2024, you do not have to pay membership dues in June.** (You can also make a one-time donation of \$120 or more to qualify, but we encourage the painless monthly donation.)

Think about it: if 10 people commit to contributing \$100 a month, we will wipe out the 2023 deficit. Or 20 people committing to \$50 a month. You get the idea. The goal is to raise \$10,000 through member donations, with monthly contributions beginning as soon as possible. We want to go into the 2024 concert season with a clean balance sheet. We also want to tell potential donors and advertisers that the group has strong support from its members.

(What if you sign up on January 2? Well, we'll be nice about it. If you wait until April, though, we'll ask you for dues this year. If you keep up your monthly contributions for 2024 and beyond, you'll be able to join dues-free beginning in 2025. You can always change our mind with a big contribution. 😊 )

Can you afford to give \$100 a month as I do? That has the potential to be transformative. Every amount improves our situation. Attracting more members, donors, advertisers, and audience members also means more people to help.

#### **THE BOTTOM LINE**

I'm no prophet of doom and gloom, but the reality is that we must be proactive if we want the Summer Chorale to be here for the next generation of singers and audience members. We can't assume that it will continue just because we enjoy it. We have to adapt to our surroundings and to current realities to keep the organization viable and the music available summer after summer.

If MDSC means to you even a fraction of what it means to me (and I suspect that for many of you, it means even more), I know you'll want to work to keep it going. I've outlined a few ways to help here. I hope you'll think seriously about them and commit to doing what you can to help MDSC thrive.

Wishing you the best for your holidays and the coming new year!

Fondly,  
David