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Robert Ray retires from St. Louis Symphony's In Unison Chorus

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POST-DISPATCH CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

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"I will sing of God's mercy, every day, every hour, He gives me power. He never failed me yet."

ST. LOUIS — On the stage of Powell Symphony Hall on Monday night, it was clear that everyone was there to work.

The In Unison Chorus director, Robert Ray, started with a warm greeting and the promise of birthday cake — his birthday cake — before having the group stand and loosen up: first physically, then vocally, doing warm-up exercises to get their bodies and voices in the right place to make music.

Then they turned to the first piece of music: "Lift Every Voice and Sing," popularly known as "the black national anthem." Ray started with the higher voices, then turned to the lower ones, refining the sound, always positive, and drawing audible improvements from his chorus.

"Lift every voice," he said, putting the stress where he wanted it. "Let it swell, bring it up — that's good!" And it was.

Ray, 64, started as a pianist, got a part-time job accompanying the St. Louis Symphony Chorus and has morphed into a successful composer and choral director.

He worked to establish the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra's outreach program in black churches and founded the SLSO's In Unison Chorus in 1994, leading the community gospel choir in two concerts with the orchestra each year.

"In 15 years, he has made a greater impact than many people make in a lifetime," said music director David Robertson.

Now Ray is stepping down from that podium. The Black History Month concert on Feb. 19 will be his last at Powell Symphony Hall; then he has one more concert in an area church and will retire after 25 years of association with the SLSO.

"You can't underestimate what he did for the community," said the orchestra's former conductor Leonard Slatkin, who worked extensively with Ray. "It was his idea to reach into neighborhoods that were not traditionally concert-going; he's the one who identified the black churches where we should be."

Just as importantly, Ray also exposed the symphony's staff and musicians to other styles of music, from gospel to classical, that was written and performed by African-Americans, said Marc Thayer, the orchestra's vice president for education and community partnerships.

Ray isn't retiring from his day job as a professor of music at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, where he teaches and leads another community chorus. But a stroke he suffered in the summer of 2007 left him with some long-term challenges with playing and cognition.

He still has a hitch in his gait, and occasionally the word he's seeking escapes him, "but I call myself a real miracle child," he said. "I give God the praise and glory. He brought me back."

Sylvia, his wife of 38 years, gets the rest of the praise. "She got me moving," Ray said, "and whatever organization there is, it's Sylvia." They're a team, they both say.

"Our relationship was formed around music," said Sylvia, who sings in every choir Ray directs, and is a frequent soloist. Their daughter Nia, a lawyer, doesn't sing, but is, said her mother, "our greatest supporter."

Ray, a St. Louis native whose career as a concert pianist included performances with the Seoul (Korea) Philharmonic, has spent his life playing in black churches. His gospel chorus "He Never Failed Me Yet" has been performed by choirs around the world; his "Gospel Mass" was done at Carnegie Hall.

He was the accompanist for the Symphony Chorus when then-director Tom Peck asked him to find and prepare an African-American chorus for a specific piece. That was a success, and when the SLSO realized that it needed to reach out to city residents, Ray was the logical man to form and lead a permanent community gospel choir.

They rehearse, 120 strong, every Monday night. Over the years, Ray said, "this chorus has given me a lot of joy. Half of them have been with me from the beginning."

Most of the chorus members, but not all, are African-American. In the chorus' first season, Ray stood up to a black composer who "didn't want a single white person singing," he said. "We had a lot of meetings about that." Ray prevailed; the entire chorus sang.

Some of Ray's challenges are the ones that most choirmasters face, such as finding enough tenors and basses to maintain a good balance. Everyone in In Unison is a volunteer, and there's a wide range of musicianship.

Most of the singers are accustomed to singing in a particular style in church on Sunday mornings. Ray pushes them to do more, in styles ranging from gospel to jazz to classical, in English and Latin, German and Swahili. One of the things he looks for in auditions is a willingness to stretch artistically.

Gwen Wesley, a first soprano, has been a member of the chorus from the start. "Robert is one who strives for excellence in everything we do," she said, "He gets us to the point where we're confident about the music, and proud that we accomplished it."

Wesley credits Ray with creating "a family kind of atmosphere. He's a very compassionate person; he shows up at funerals and at outside performances (members of the chorus) do. He's encouraging, and makes you want to do more."

She paused. "Who doesn't want to follow a leader like that?"

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