

# Conlon marries amateur chorus, pro orchestra

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James Conlon

which Conlon describes as "hair-raising," was performed just once before at the festival, in 1985.

The second weekend will open on May 27 with a beautiful but rarely heard work by Mahler: "Das klagende Lied" (Song of lamentation). The May Festival's nod to the 100th anniversary of Mahler's death is "The Cain and Abel story — do you like fairy tales? It's a fairy tale," Conlon said. Besides that, the performance will include the debut of a major new star, mezzo-soprano Ekaterina Semenchuk.

The Grammy Award-winning conductor has won numerous honors, but whether it's "Elijah" or Dvorak's "Te Deum," Conlon's goal is always to let the music shine over his own ego. "The goal is always to be completely open as an interpretive vessel for that work. I'm always going in that direction. I'm never saying to myself, 'What do I have to say about this piece, what's my take?'" he said. "To me, that's too self-centered. To me, the center is always the piece of music."

Robert Porco (who conducts this year's concert in Covington's Cathedral Basilica). Because the festival skipped a few seasons, this officially is its 90th season — an impressive record for any organization.

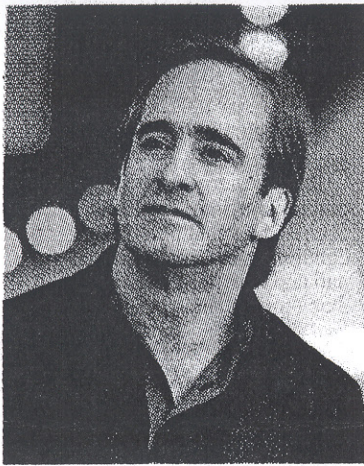
"I think it speaks to the strength of the tradition, and to the strength of Cincinnati's sense of pride, that they have something very special," Conlon said. "The tradition is a marriage of amateur choir singing — amateur in a positive sense — together with one of the great American orchestras in one of America's great halls. That marriage of the people singing is something that comes out of our heritage in the United States and out of European heritage. There's hardly any place in this country that can point to anything equivalent of this."

He will be revising two of choral music's most majestic works, Verdi's "Requiem," which opens the festival, and

Mendelssohn's oratorio, "Elijah," which closes it.

Conlon has not led "Elijah" at the festival in 15 years. His view of a work may change over time not only because of maturity, but also because of the "cumulative effect," he said. "You may not have done 'Elijah' in 15 years, but if you start to count up the performances you've done of (Mendelssohn's) 'Italian Symphony,' 'Scottish Symphony,' the first symphony, 'Die erste Walpurgisnacht,' and those thousands of violin concerti that you have accompanied — you know, it has a cumulative effect," he said.

Similarly, with Verdi's "Requiem" if a conductor is steeped in the greatest operas of Verdi, you can tell the



Provided / Todd Rosenberg

James Conlon has led the Cincinnati May Festival since 1979.

## Conductor Conlon keeps focus on music

By Janelle Gelfand  
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James Conlon was beaming at news he'd just heard that subscription sales to this year's Cincinnati May Festival are up at a time when arts groups nationwide continue to struggle with a stingy economy.

"I think the May Festival can be proud of a very basic choice we have made in difficult times," said the festival's music director since 1979. "In the last 20 years, we have stayed true to our mission — to be an absolute beacon of maintenance of the great choral repertory, in an age when you can't say that that can be taken for granted."

Conlon has planned choral greats and lesser known masterpieces for this year's festival. He leads the annual choral music marathon over two weekends, Friday through May 28.

One of the busiest conductors in the world, Conlon — who is also music director of Los Angeles Opera and the

Ravinia Festival near Chicago — was in town last month for back-to-back meetings with May Festival supporters and management. During his stay, he visited the Taft Theatre, Downtown, where the festival will perform when Music Hall undergoes renovation two years from now.

"That's not the year we'll do (Schoenberg's massive) 'Gurrelieder,'" he said, laughing. "But certainly any of our classical works — Haydn, Mozart, Bach, Schubert or Mendelssohn — will fit."

This is the 138th year of the May Festival, showcasing the all-volunteer May Festival Chorus prepared by

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Enquirer file



### May Festival veterans

- Sally Harper and Bob Lucero have sung in the May Festival Chorus for 40 years, D6
- Schedule of performances, D6