

A passion for music

Steubenville native honored by Chorus America

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Growing up in Steubenville, Robert Porco may not have realized just how renowned he would become.

Porco is the director of choruses for the Cincinnati May Festival and the Cleveland Orchestra. And on June 10, the dedication and passion by which he lives by was recognized as he was awarded the Michael Korn Founders Award from Chorus America.

"This prestigious lifetime achievement award recognizes the immense contribution he has made to choral singing in America," explained Anthony Zancanella, Cincinnati May Festival Chorus member.

Chorus America President Ann Meier Baker announced the recipients of this year's award shows an "exemplary leadership demonstrated by deserving individuals and organizations who serve as a model for all choruses as they strive for success in their communities."

Although Porco could not be in attendance for the award as he was out of the country and the award was presented in San Francisco, he noted he is honored to have received such recognition.

Porco is the son of the late Anthony and Elizabeth Porco. He graduated from Steubenville High School and then went on to Ohio State University, where he obtained three degrees in music.

He said he has been interested in the area of fine arts as long as he can remember, perhaps since the age of 5 or 6. In addition to playing the accordion as a young boy, he also was involved in the high school choir.

"I was very honored and very flattered to receive this award," Porco stated, noting there have been many prestigious individuals who have received the honor.

"I was surprised and truly humbled by the whole experience. Unfortunately I was not able to be in attendance because when they announced that I was going to receive the award, I already had plans to be in Italy."

Porco said he travels to Italy as often as he can because he is proud of his parents' heritage.

He also stated he is proud of the Ohio Valley and being able to have had the chance to attend Steubenville High School.

His brother, Anthony, still resides in Steubenville and teaches in the district as a speech and hearing therapist.

"It was a wonderful experience," Porco said. "I got a good education in Steubenville High School and had some very influential friends and teachers there."

Chorus America established the honorary citation of the Michael Korn Founders Award for Development of the Professional Choral Art in 1978 in order to honor an individual with a lifetime or significant contribution to the professional choral arts.

Porco has not only traveled throughout the United States to conduct orchestras and choruses, but has visited the world doing what he loves best.

Conducting a range of classical repertoires, he has been recognized as one of the leading choral musicians in America and has achieved renown for his preparation of choruses for such prominent conductors as John Adams, Pierre Boulez, James Conlon, Andrew Davis, Christoph von Dohnanyi, Paavo Jarvi, Erich Kunzel, Raymond Leppard, James Levine, Jahja Ling, Jesus Lopez-Cobos, Zubin Mehta, John Nelson, Andre Previn, Kurt Sanderling, Leonard Slatkin, Robert Shaw, Franz Welser-Most, John Williams and David Zinman.

The 2010-11 season marked Porco's 22nd year as director of choruses for the Cincinnati May Festival, making him the longest-tenured director in the festival's history, according to Zancanella.

Through his role, Porco works with 150 volunteer singers to prepare or conduct them in major choral repertoire, ranging from the cantatas of Bach to the Pulitzer Prize-winning, "On the Transmigration of Souls," performed by the May Festival Chorus in 2008 under the baton of the composer John Adams.

Through the leadership of Porco, the May Festival Chorus appeared at Carnegie Hall three times, performing Mendelssohn's, "Elijah," with Jesus Lopez-Cobos and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra; "Mahler's Symphony No. 8" with Robert Shaw, the Cleveland Orchestra and other choruses; and Britten's, "War Requiem," with James Conlon and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.

Last season also marked Porco's 13th year as director of choruses for the Cleveland Orchestra, where he prepared the choruses for the Cleveland Orchestra and the Blossom Festival. The choruses prepared by the Steubenville native also appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Lucerne and Edinburgh festivals and the London Proms.

For the past 13 years, he has commuted more than 30,000 miles annually between Cincinnati and Cleveland in his roles as director of choruses for the cities' orchestras.

He has guided and influenced the development of hundreds of student musicians and is a sought-after guest instructor and coach for conservatory students, young professional conductors and singers. He has guest taught at Central State University, the Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati, the Settlement School in Cleveland, Centre College in Kentucky and Harvard University, among others.

In addition, Porco also is an adjunct professor and senior adviser of doctoral-level choral conducting in Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, where he was the chair of the choral department from 1980-98.

"For all his achievements, Mr. Porco's humble beginnings as the son of a Steubenville steel-mill worker anchor him while his Italian heritage fuels his passion for music," Zancanella said. "His childhood days learning to play the accordion and his teen years performing from dance-band chord sheets in Veterans of Foreign Wars halls and Elks lodges were his training ground in music theory and performance. To this day, he remains a dedicated educator and passionate advocate of choral music for one and all."