



Max Nolin: Sanctuary Choir Conductor/Middle School Music Teacher

Tell us about your childhood church experiences and how you came to be interested in sacred music.

Growing up, my family and I attended Kent United Methodist Church in Kent, Ohio. It was a church similar in size and makeup to BUMC. Both my parents are singers and my Dad's parents also had careers as church music directors so being a part of the church music program was not an option! My mom was the children's choir director so I sang (and misbehaved) with them until I got to middle school and then I joined the youth choir and handbell choir. When I was fourteen I joined the adult choir and truly fell in love with sacred music. It was my first time singing some of the great major works in the history of church music and I loved the repertoire.

What kind of training did you have in order to become a church choir director at such a young age?

I got my first chance at directing a choir when I was a senior in high school and I convinced the church to let me direct the youth choir. That being said, when I went to undergrad at Baldwin Wallace University, I went as a vocal performance major because I wanted to sing opera. Yet, within the first few months of college I was selected to be in the top choir and was inspired by our conductor, Dr. Dirk Garner. From then on, I knew I wanted to be involved in choral music. During undergrad I got a job directing a small Lutheran Choir in Middleburg Heights Ohio. I didn't quite know what I was doing yet, but their patience and grace during those years gave me the opportunity to learn how to do the job. After undergrad I went to Westminster Choir College in Princeton, NJ to get a masters in choral conducting. The school is basically heaven for choir nerds and it really made me the musician I am today. After that I moved to the Washington area and found BUMC!

How do you see your role as a church choir director? Are there any aspects of the job that we might be surprised to learn about?

A choir director is primarily an organizer of people and music. A conductor is nothing without singers, so the main job is to teach, inspire, and coordinate the singers so they can make the best music possible. I love the singers at BUMC and they are by far the most talented group of volunteer singers I've ever met—they make the job easy. One thing I think that might surprise people is the amount of study that is required to teach and conduct a piece. I try to learn as much as possible about the music and composer. The more I know the clearer my rehearsal of the piece can become. Likewise, the choir really puts time and effort into learning their music in and out of rehearsal. Behind one three-minute anthem there may be hours of work and rehearsal.

In addition to being our Sanctuary Choir Director, you also teach music at a local school. Can you reflect on that work?

Over the last three years I've taught music for 6th - 12th graders at the Edmund Burke School in Washington, DC. This year I will be the middle school choir director at Norwood School in Bethesda. I think music education is vital in the life of a young person. I truly think it is as important as reading and writing. There are tons of studies touting its ability to improve brain function and learning, but more importantly, music is how human beings deal with and relate to their emotional world. Kids need music. I specifically have focused my career on middle school students because that is where we lose the most music students due to the chaos of growing up. I want students to know that if they build musical skills now those skills will be with them for the rest of their life. I've never met an adult who regretted knowing how to sing or play an instrument, but I've met plenty of adults who wish they had done music when they were younger.

When you're not working on music for the choir, what kind of music do you like to listen to?

It's such a lame answer but everything. I love bluegrass and folk music a lot, but also like ambient pop and electronic music. Some music theater makes its way in as well. But the real answer is I'm such a choral nerd that I often listen to it for fun!

What are the requirements for joining the choir? Do participants need to have any singing experience?

The only requirement for joining the choir is a love for singing, and even that is negotiable! But, in all seriousness, there is no audition to be in the choir and no experience is required. We are an amazing group to start singing with for the first time because we have so many leaders in the ensemble that will help you learn the music and welcome you into our fold. We are also flexible! We know that work and family life can sometimes take you away on a given Thursday or Sunday. Perfect attendance is not necessary and mostly we want you singing with us as much as your schedule and life allow. If you'd like to talk more about joining the choir, please send me an email (max@washmorefeet.org) and we can set up a meeting time!

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