



# On Preparing a Choir to Perform "Babi Yar"

An Interview with Erica J. Washburn

By Andrew Schartmann



Erica Washburn, Director of Choral Activities at  
New England Conservatory

*Conductor and mezzo-soprano Erica Washburn is Director of Choral Activities at New England Conservatory (NEC) in Boston, Massachusetts. Known for her student-centric approach to classroom and rehearsal instruction, and commitment to the performance of new music, she is the recipient of several outstanding alumni awards, including the distinguished honour of having been inducted into the Westminster Choir College Music Education Hall of Fame.*

*As a conductor, Washburn has worked with myriad professional and academic choral ensembles. She is a sought-after guest clinician who frequently leads state and regional festival choirs and spent five summers as a conductor and voice faculty member for the New York State Summer School of the Arts School of Choral Studies.*

*Under her direction, the New England Conservatory's choirs have been featured on several live and pre-recorded broadcasts, including the North Carolina based station WCPE Great Sacred Music, WICN Public Radio, and WGBH Boston. The choirs can also be heard in collaboration with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project on the BMOP/Sound label recording of Paul Moravec's The Blizzard Voices, as well as with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Tanglewood Festival Chorus on the Deutsche Grammophon recording of Shostakovich's Symphony no. 13.*

*Washburn's stage credits include appearances as Madame Lidoine in Francis Poulenc's Dialogues of the Carmelites, Rebecca Nurse in Robert Ward's The Crucible, and Mother/Allison in the premiere of Lee Hoiby's This is the Rill Speaking, among others. Her recital and orchestral solo credits are numerous, and her live premiere from Jordan Hall of the late Richard Toensing's Night Songs and Evening Prayers can be heard on Albany Records, with the New England Conservatory Symphonic Winds.*

*DSCH Journal had the distinct pleasure of speaking with Maestro Washburn about her experience preparing choristers to perform and record Shostakovich's "Babi Yar" Symphony.*



*DSCH Journal*: You were involved in two performances of Shostakovich's "Babi Yar" Symphony. Where and with whom did those take place? And what was your role?

Erica Washburn: That's correct. And I am grateful for the unusual, though wonderful, opportunity to have been involved in these performances.

The first was done in collaboration with my colleague Hugh Wolff, who serves as New England Conservatory's Stanford and Norma Jean Calderwood Director of Orchestras Chair. Our two ensembles—his NEC Philharmonia and my NEC Symphonic Choir (tenors and basses)—partnered for a performance on 20 April 2022 in Jordan Hall [a renowned concert hall and a National Historic Landmark of the United States]. As Director of Choral Activities at NEC, my role was to prepare the tenors and basses for one piano rehearsal with Maestro Wolff, as well as four combined orchestra/chorus rehearsals.

The second (and subsequent third, and fourth performances, as it was a three-performance run) was 4–6 May 2023 with the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) at Symphony Hall, under the baton of Andris Nelsons. Again, the tenors and basses of my Symphonic Choir participated, this time joining the ranks of the tenors and basses of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus (TFC) with James Burton. As an invited guest of the BSO and TFC, I served as Associate Chorus Master alongside Maestro Burton (Primary), though it was very much a collaborative effort.

*DSCH*: Is there a general set of preparatory guidelines you follow before delving into the specifics of a piece this size?

EW: Regardless of the language in which any choir of mine is performing, I always follow the same pedagogical process: upon the first read-through, I contextualise the piece for

the ensemble with some background information about the work and its composer; I then focus the thoughts of the musicians so they begin to process this information communally. We spend several rehearsals singing on a variety of neutral syllables; this is helpful for the choristers because it allows them to focus their efforts on fundamentals (pitch and rhythm), as well as layering in musical nuance (e.g., articulation, phrasing, dynamics). To instrumentalists, the time spent on this might seem excessive, but singers (and their conductors) must always bear in mind the "fifteen-minute rule": for every minute of singing in performance, it takes approximately fifteen minutes for a singer to learn the music and its nuances—not just for the mind, but also for the body, which is the vessel through which the instrument (voice) processes the information it receives, and by which the muscles and brain communicate with each other. Add to that the text, which is an element that instrumentalists typically do not need to contend with, and sometimes that fifteen-minute rule becomes seventeen to twenty minutes.

By the time we begin to layer in the text of the work, discussing translations, contextual drama and more about the background of the poetry, poet, and composer, the musicians are able to better conceptualise the subject matter and its purpose.

*DSCH*: Did the sensitive subject matter at the heart of this symphony impact your approach to coaching the choir?

EW: My plan had been to follow this process [as outlined above], just as I have done for two-plus decades, but shortly after we started rehearsals on Symphony no. 13, which was in February of 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine (24 February), and on 1 March, Russian bombs were dropped on a television station very near to the 140-acre Babi Yar memorial site, causing damage to some of the buildings.

*DSCH*: Such unreal circumstances must have affected your students deeply.

EW: The NEC community is an international one: our students, faculty, and staff are tied not only to countries across the world—including Russia and Ukraine—but also to a broad spectrum of religions and cultural practices. Our ensembles reflect this diversity, both in personal background and in performance repertoire. Just before our first rehearsal after the 1 March bombing, as I was working on the chorus seating chart going through the tenor and bass roster for what seemed like the hundredth time, it struck me that this work, so perfectly paired with Yevtushenko's words and Shostakovich's musical voice, was exactly what we needed to be working on—to be talking about, and working through together.

Add to this our incredible Russian diction coach, Olga Lisovskaya, a Ukrainian-born classical singer, who spent many hours working closely with me and my choristers and sharing her personal accounts of what the texts meant to her and the Ukrainian and Russian people. All the while she was concerned for the safety of some of her own family members and friends still in Ukraine, and she openly shared those hardships with us.

These factors contributed to the 120-plus student musicians having a very unique perspective and connection to the work. Their performance on 20 April 2022, which was also masked for the chorus as we were still coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, was presented with an astounding level of professionalism, maturity, conviction, and musicianship—something rarely seen from eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds, but which is commonplace at NEC.

*DSCH*: The first movement is especially powerful in this regard with its sober commentary on the massacre at





Washburn leading a choir rehearsal at New England Conservatory in Boston

Babi Yar. How did your preparation of the other movements, which explore a variety of characters and emotions related to different hardships in the Soviet Union, differ from your approach to the monumental first movement?

EW: Preparing a chorus (or any ensemble, really) for a guest conductor is a tricky thing. On the one hand you need to cover the basics—pitches, rhythms, text pronunciation, dynamics, and so forth; on the other hand, you need to put into place all of the specific additional markings the guest conductor shares with you. These elements take up large swathes of rehearsal time, often leaving little time to go as deeply as I would like into the poetry/text and overall context of the work. Of course, I provide my singers with a cursory overview of any work they learn, but in guest conductor situations, I see my role as the voice expert (very few instrumental conductors have intimate knowledge of the human instrument, which makes sense as they have chosen a different sound medium), and so I

invest my podium time with a choir in this way.

*DSCH:* Could you please tell us more about how your work differs from that of the principal conductor?

EW: My emphasis on a work's vocal aspects are beneficial to a guest conductor for three main reasons: firstly, I am handing over to them the most vocally prepared chorus I can, which is producing the best sound they are able to produce; secondly, the guest conductor will not need to spend time providing notes on fundamental aspects of vocal technique; thirdly, it gives the guest conductor an opportunity to discuss the emotional/dramatic context of a work with the chorus as it relates specifically to *their* personal vision and interpretation of a piece, without the influence of my opinion colouring the choir's performance.

That said, there were occasions during rehearsals in which I would reference characters with the aim of helping the choristers understand the purpose of

Shostakovich's printed dynamics and/or articulations. For example, the personification of Humour in the second movement requires the singers to make several shifts of character. Told from the narrator's perspective, the choristers are often in conversation with the soloist who is relaying different scenarios in which Humour makes an appearance. Sometimes Humour is impish, wreaking havoc when it is least expected, and at other times he is a hero to the people, praised for his bravery during the most trying, desperate of times. The ability to follow Humour's train of thought at any given moment is crucial for the singers; with that knowledge they are able to grasp the compositional joke(s) that Shostakovich included in the movement.

*DSCH:* Had you prepared a choir to sing in Russian before? How did you address challenges around pronunciation and enunciation?

EW: Symphony no. 13 was not my first experience with Russian texts. I have prepared several pieces in



Russian before, including works by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Sviridov, Chesnokov, and others. I am also a professional singer and have performed in Russian in my work as a soloist.

Teaching at NEC since 2009, however, which is in the heart of Boston, has taught me one thing above all others: no one is alone. There is no need to struggle learning the phonetics of a language from a book or recording when there are experts in that language all around you. As I mentioned earlier, NEC is an international community; it is a microcosm of the larger city in which it lives. I knew that the Tanglewood Festival Chorus relied on Lisovskaya for Russian diction coaching, and my NEC singers were already committed to the 2023 performance run of the Shostakovich with the BSO and TFC. It seemed a logical choice to connect with Olga and ask her to come on board for our NEC performance in 2022. Her work with my student choristers was brilliant, and her patience unending. Although she was not with us for every rehearsal, I also had several Russian speaking students in the chorus who would assist by demonstrating particular sounds that exist in Russian versus other languages.

*DSCH:* Could you please describe further the importance of diction in a performance such as this, especially when coaching non-native singers?

*EW:* Consonant and vowel formation is key when singing in any language. Singers phonate on vowels; that is how we sustain pitch. Even though some consonants are voiced, meaning they carry pitch and can be sustained, they typically require a singer's mouth/lips to be closed. All other consonants are considered, in the broadest sense, to be plosive or fricative, voiced or unvoiced; singers typically do not sustain these types of sounds. Most languages have these sounds—Russian included—in addition to sounds that are more unique. Teaching singers to embrace these sound combinations is a process

of trial, error, and correction—a process that is repeated until they have mastered the syllabic mixture and eventually the complete word.

*DSCH:* Is this process any different with a choir as opposed to an individual singer?

*EW:* It is significantly more difficult for a chorus partnered with an instrumental ensemble because they need to increase the volume of the consonants so as to be heard over the instrumentalists. And yet they are usually situated directly *behind* the instrumentalists, which requires their sound to carry even further in order to reach the listener. As a result, consonants are typically treated with a forte dynamic regardless of the composer's written dynamic; vowels, on the contrary, follow the printed dynamics. It's a challenge to balance these conflicting forces on the best of days, let alone when singers are masked! This was the case for our 2022 NEC performance, which required the tenors and basses to sing everything at twice the dynamic to overcome the fabric dampening their phonation.

*DSCH:* How does preparing a choir to sing music that is primarily in unison compare to more traditional homophonic and polyphonic settings?

*EW:* In some respects, unison singing is easier, but in others, significantly more difficult.

Unison singing requires exact placement and formation of consonants, vowels, breaths/lifts, articulations, etc., across an entire chorus. Not one voice can be out of sync with any other at any given moment. The collective thought process must be unified, which takes an incredible amount of concentration, as well as consideration for the other singers around you. As a chorister in that situation, you must always have one ear focused on the singers beside and behind you, with the other ear turned inward to ensure you are listening to yourself. You also need one eye on the score

and the other on the conductor; and you need to be thinking about your posture. Are you standing tall? Are you keeping your music/folder at the correct height? Are you experiencing unnecessary and unwanted physical tension in the body and/or voice? And if so, how do you alleviate that tension as quickly as possible? Are you pronouncing the text correctly? Is your face representing the dramatic action you are sounding? And so on ...

While these principles also hold true in polyphony and are certainly goals every conductor works toward with their choir, the nature of polyphonic singing has the ability to cover occasional missteps in performance. For example, if an alto or two forgets to lift between back-to-back phrases, but they are singing a counter-subject while another section is singing the subject, the listener's ear will most likely be drawn to the subject and not notice the stray alto who made a mistake. If a moment like that occurs in unison singing, a chorister ends up with an unwanted solo.

*DSCH:* Did you encounter any unexpected challenges in preparing this work for performance?

*EW:* Aside from procuring access to a transliterated score for the chorus (for which I have my colleague James Burton of the BSO/TFC to thank), fortunately not. Both collaborations were wonderful, challenging experiences for everyone involved. The privilege of encouraging my choristers as they file on stage, greeting them when they file off, and witnessing first-hand their satisfaction of a job brilliantly done is what makes the many hours of private score study and ensemble rehearsals worth the effort. To have had the added bonus of recording Symphony no. 13 with the BSO and TFC for Deutsche Grammophon was an experience the NEC choristers—and I—will not soon forget.

