



OMAHA
SYMPHONY

Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director

program notes

2023/24 SEASON

Brahms' German Requiem

November 12, 2023 | 2 p.m.

Holland Performing Arts Center

Ernest Richardson, conductor | Siri Howard, soprano

Armando Contreras, baritone | A. Barron Breland, chorusmaster

A Special Thank You to the Schools' Vocal Staffs!

Abraham Lincoln High School Concert Choir
Elmer Ellefson, Choral Music Director

Creighton Preparatory School Choir
Rob Chesire, Director
Beth Engel, Collaborative Artist

Bellevue West High Singers
Adam J. Reiner, Director
Ellen Kershaw, Accompanist

Millard South High Singers
Jason Stevens, Director
Amy Sweets, Assistant Director

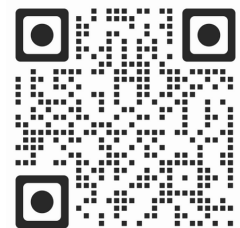
Bennington Concert Choir
Tye Hanke, Director
Jan Braden, Accompanist

Omaha North Concert Choir
Susanna Kearney, Director
River Fisher, Accompanist

Résonance

This printed program is a condensed version.

For more info about the orchestra, guest artists, and the full program notes, download the Omaha Symphony app or scan this QR code with your mobile device.



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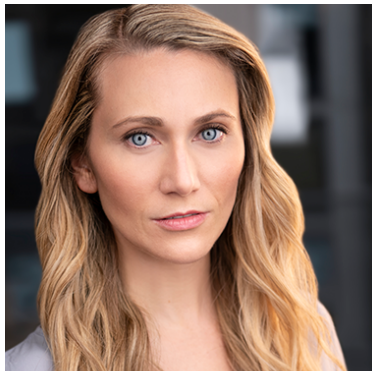
Featured Artists



Ernest Richardson, conductor

Ernest Richardson is the principal pops conductor and resident conductor of the Omaha Symphony. Since 1993, he has been integral in the development of the Symphony's vaunted education and community engagement programs, in addition to his artistic leadership in the creation and curation of the successful Symphony Pops, Symphony Rocks, and Movies Series. Richardson's innovation can be especially seen in the Symphony's Choral Collaborative, Celebrate Creativity, and Mission: Imagination programs, which remain mainstays of the organization's season.

In addition to his post in Omaha, Richardson holds the position of music director and principal conductor of the Steamboat Symphony Orchestra in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. During his tenure, the organization has grown from a community orchestra to a resident professional orchestra, attracting the finest musicians from the Front Range of Colorado. He is also the founding artistic director and CEO of the Rocky Mountain Summer Conservatory.



Siri Howard, soprano

Siri Howard (soprano) is a soloist, recording artist, and Broadway actress who began her professional career at age 10 and continues to perform in some of the world's most prestigious venues. She is thrilled to return to the Omaha Symphony after previous appearances in the *Christmas Celebration* and the Independence Day Celebration at Gene Leahy Mall. Additional solo performance collaborations include the Nashville Symphony, New Jersey Festival Orchestra, Steamboat Symphony Orchestra, Symphonic Pops of Long Island, and The Florida Orchestra. Ms. Howard performed with the New York Philharmonic in *Sweeney Todd: Live from Lincoln Center* starring Emma Thompson (PBS broadcast), and with the Philadelphia Orchestra in *A Little Night Music* 25th Anniversary Concert.

On Broadway, Ms. Howard has been in *Les Misérables* and *The Sound of Music* (Broadway Revival cast recording). She has been in the National Tours of *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Parade*, *Les Misérables*, and *The Sound of Music*, starring Richard Chamberlain, and has extensive experience playing major roles in significant regional musical theatre venues throughout the US. On the operatic stage, Ms. Howard's performances include *Le Nozze di Figaro* (Susanna), *Orpheus Descending* (Carol Cutrere), *Dido and Aeneas* (Dido), *Cendrillon* (Cendrillon), and *La Bohème* (Museta). Other notable credits include performing with the USO for veterans and active duty military as well as the 2016 Times Square New Year's Eve Ball Drop.

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She holds a Bachelor of Music degree in vocal performance from the University of Maryland College Park, and a Master of Arts in vocal performance from the Aaron Copland School of Music at Queens College. Ms. Howard has enjoyed residencies at numerous music institutes, colleges, high schools, and training programs, giving recitals, masterclasses, and lectures. She resides in Greenville, SC, with her husband and children. www.sirihoward.com



Armando Contreras, baritone

Praised for “the easy caramel syrup of his voice” (*Opera Today*), Mexican-American baritone Armando Contreras is quickly becoming a standout in the world of opera. In the summer of 2023, Mr. Contreras made his company debut with Cincinnati Opera as Lt. Roberto Gonzalez in the stage premiere of *The Knock* as well as an appearance in the company’s Opera in the Park concert, appeared as Guglielmo in *Così fan tutte* with the Newport Classical Music Festival, and sang a summer concert with Opera Fort Collins’ Guild. In 2023-2024, Mr. Contreras covered the role of Hemingway/Santiago in the

workshop for *Old Man & The Sea* with Beth Morrison Projects, sings various roles in three mini-operas (Blomster, Lockwood) with the Colorado Chamber Orchestra, sings in concert with Central City Opera and the Denver Young Artist Orchestra, sings as the bass soloist in the Brahms Requiem with Omaha Symphony, and sings the role of Zazueta/Moncada in excerpts of the new work *Zorro* by Héctor Armienta with Arizona Opera.

In the summer of 2022, Mr. Contreras returned to The Glimmerglass Festival to sing a leading role in the world premiere of the Rossini pastiche, *Tenor Overboard*, and cover Moralès in *Carmen*. In the 2022-2023 season, Mr. Contreras sang Dandini in *La Cenerentola* with Kentucky Opera, performed the role of Cesar Chavez in a workshop of *Dolores*, a new opera by Nicolas Benavidas based on the life of civil rights leader Dolores Huerta; performed recitals with Colorado State and Pikes Peak Opera League, and returned to Salt Marsh Opera to sing the role of Papageno in *The Magic Flute*.



A. Barron Breland, Chorusmaster

Dr. A. Barron Breland is in demand throughout the country as a conductor, chorusmaster, clinician, and adjudicator, and he has prepared choruses for Grammy and Tony-winning artists Laura Benanti, John Mellencamp, Norm Lewis, Brian d’Arcy James, and conductors Dale Warland, Craig Hella Johnson, and Ted Sperling. Breland has also served as Chorusmaster and prepared numerous works for the Omaha Symphony, including Beethoven’s 9th Symphony, *Carmina Burana*, *Elijah*, *Messiah*, and many others.

With degrees in Music Theory and Choral Conducting from the University of Georgia and the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, Breland has a diverse background in many different fields of music, including the piano and saxophone. Breland’s first exposure to professional choral music was as a member of the Atlanta Boy Choir where he performed with Robert Shaw and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, as well as in tours and festivals throughout Europe.

Today, he is Dean of the Graduate School and Vice Provost for Faculty and Academic Affairs at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, and besides his work with the Omaha Symphony and Omaha Performing Arts, he is also the Principal Conductor of Résonance, a semi-professional chorus whose debut album *Pilgrimage* was released in July 2020 on the MSR Classics label, and the Artistic Director of the River City Mixed Chorus, a 160-member community chorus. All the ensembles under Breland’s leadership perform regularly with the Omaha Symphony, have headlined and performed at state and regional ACDA and NMEA conferences, and have taken the stages of historic and iconic venues around the region.

Program Notes

Ein Deutsches Requiem, Op. 45, (A German Requiem)

Johannes Brahms

Born: May 7, 1833 – Hamburg, Germany

Died: April 3, 1897 – Vienna, Austria

Piece Length: Approximately 70 minutes

In the first few days of February 1865, Johannes Brahms received a telegram from his brother, stating “If you want to see our Mother again, come at once.” He immediately left Vienna and arrived in Hamburg February 4th, but Christine Brahms had died of a stroke two days earlier. The loss of his mother was significant for Brahms, who relayed to Clara Schumann “God took my mother away as mercifully as possible. She had not changed at all and looked as sweet and kind as when she was alive.” After returning to Vienna, a friend visiting Brahms reported that he found Brahms at the piano playing Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*. Brahms cried while talking about his mother, although he never stopped playing.

This death may very well have been the catalyst for Brahms to take on the colossal task of composing a requiem. Traditionally, a requiem is a religious, Catholic ceremony for the dead. Most musical settings of the requiem adhere to the strict liturgical framework and Latin text therein. In fact, the name requiem is taken from the introit of the Catholic mass: “Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine” (Give them eternal rest, O Lord). Brahms’ German Requiem takes a different approach, something that’s been described as reflecting his humanist and agnostic viewpoint. The work’s central message seems to be the very first and last phrases sung by the choir: “Selig sind, die da Leid tragen, denn sie sollen getröstet werden.” (Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted, from *Matthew 5:4*). Brahms’ work is aimed at giving comfort to the living as opposed to the dead. As a result, he set about creating a text that better reflected this perspective and chose passages from the *German Luther Bible* that fit his goals. Brahms explained, “As far as the text is concerned, I confess that I would gladly omit even the word German and instead use *Human*; also with my best knowledge and will I would dispense with places like John 3:16. On the other hand, I have chosen one thing or another because I am a musician, because I needed it, and because with my venerable authors I can’t delete or dispute anything.”

The work might best be described as gloriously, profoundly gentle. At times violent and earth-shaking, at others sorrowful and contemplative, the ultimate takeaway is comfort. Perhaps this was originally for Brahms himself at the loss of a beloved parent, but it remains as a gift to us all.