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Morningside Heights

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Kent Tritle

Bringing Music to Sacred Places... And Beyond

The New Maestro of Morningside Heights

Choral conductor, music director, and organ virtuoso — Kent Tritle delights audiences throughout Manhattan.

by Steve Kusunoki

Kent Tritle's New York story begins as so many have: with dreams of making a life in music. He came to the city from Spirit Lake, Iowa in 1982 to pursue studies at The Juilliard School, but how his story has unfolded in the three decades since is his alone. He has earned a reputation as "New York's reigning choral conductor" (The New York Times) and one of the most acclaimed anywhere; a leader in the city's music world in ways it takes the fingers of two hands to count.

Tritle is in his second year as director of cathedral music and organist of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine; in his eighth season as music director of the Oratorio Society of New York, the city's 200-voice volunteer chorus; and sixth season as music director of Musica Sacra, the longest continuously performing professional chorus in New York City. He is also director of choral activities at the Manhattan School of Music and a member of the graduate faculty of The Juilliard School, and is the host of the weekly radio show, "The Choral Mix with Kent Tritle" on WQXR. An acclaimed organ virtuoso, he is also the organist of the New York Philharmonic and the American Symphony Orchestra.

Tritle moved to Morningside Heights, to a residence on the Cathedral grounds, in 2011. But while living there is new, the neighborhood has deep personal resonance.

"In addition to having joined the cathedral, I've been working for the past five years with the incredible young musicians at the Manhattan School of Music, where we've just created a doctoral program in choral conducting," he said. "But this neighborhood has been important to me since my first days in the city. I would find myself playing for organ master classes at Riverside Church and James Chapel at the Union Theological Seminary and I must have played at a dozen organ recitals in those days at St. Paul's Chapel at Columbia."

The Cathedral itself was a learning ground.

"Richard Westenburg, a fellow Midwesterner who was the head of the choral program at Juilliard, was also director of cathedral music at St. John the Divine and was a real mentor



In 1982 Kent Tritle moved from Iowa to New York City to pursue studies at The Juilliard School. Today he is known as "New York's reigning choral conductor."
Photo by Jennifer Taylor



Prior to joining the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Tritle was director of music ministries at St. Ignatius Loyola Church for 22 years. While at St. Ignatius he created the popular "Sacred Music in a Sacred Space" series.
Photo by Richard Termine

to me," Tritle said. "In particular I remember assisting him at the cathedral with a recording by Musica Sacra, a group I now lead, of works for a great space. It was an awesome experience to hear glorious choral music professionally sung from the great choir steps. I was also in school with Dorothy Papadakos, the assistant organist here at the time. She invited me to play for a number of services here and I will always remember playing an Evensong improvisation when Eudora Welty's name was installed in the American Poets' Corner."

Tritle also found the cathedral a refuge.



Tritle is in his second year as director of cathedral music and organist of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. One of his first moves when he became director was to re-establish the "Great Music in a Great Space" concert series name, — a legacy from Cathedral life of the 1970s and 1980s — with the aim of putting St. John the Divine on the map as a destination for distinctive musical experiences.
Photo by Joshua South

"Some Sundays, after playing my church job in Westchester, I would stop in to the Vespers service just to chill out and find calm. Choral music and candlelight...what better calm is there?"

Tritle went on to achieve prominence, leading the Dessoff Choirs and creating the "Sacred Music in a Sacred Space" series at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola. But when the opportunity arose to discuss leading the musical life at St. John, he said, "I found my heart in my throat to think things might actually come full circle in this way."

"For music lovers," The New York Times said, "his move is a big deal." And for Tritle, the timing was perfect.

"Given the options in a lifetime, I would like to take an adventure and do something new. It's a personal choice to shake up my life a little bit," he told The Times. "If I can make a contribution to the city of New York by going to St. John the Divine and helping build an even stronger and better program, that's my calling."

St. John the Divine as a destination for music

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Continued on next page

4 UPCOMING PERFORMANCES

- **Friday, Feb. 8, 7:30 p.m.** *Cathedral of St. John the Divine*, Manhattan School of Music Symphony and Symphonic Chorus, Philippe Entremont, conductor, Kent Tritle, organ. POULENC "Gloria"; SAINT-SAËNS Symphony No. 3, "Organ"
- **Wednesday, Feb. 27, 7:30 p.m.** *Borden Auditorium, Manhattan School of Music*, Manhattan School of Music Symphony and Symphonic Chorus, Kent Tritle, conductor. MENDELSSOHN "Elijah."
- **Wednesday, March 20, 7:30 p.m.** *Cathedral of St. John the Divine*, "Great Music in a Great Space," Cathedral Choir and Orchestra of St. John the Divine, Kent Tritle, music director and conductor. VAUGHAN WILLIAMS "Mass in G Minor" FAURÉ "Requiem."
- **Wednesday, April 10, 7:30 p.m.** *Cathedral of St. John the Divine*, Manhattan School of Music Chamber Choir and Chamber Ensemble. Kent Tritle, conductor. MONTEVERDI "Vespers of 1610."

Continued from previous page

musical experiences. Under that umbrella, there is a choral series that has already featured Bach's "Mass in B Minor," and later this season will present Vaughan Williams's "Mass in G Minor," Fauré's "Requiem" and a series of organ recitals. And as director of cathedral music, he has the chance to collaborate with some of the cathedral's distinguished guest artists, including Paul Winter, Judy Collins and the Forces of Nature Dance Company.

The three choral components of the cathedral are flourishing: "The Choristers [students at the Cathedral School] are singing better than ever, with the guidance of my wonderful choral associate, Malcolm Merriweather," Tritle said. "The volunteer chorus has a newly established regimen, participating in various cathedral liturgies and concerts. And the professional choir has been reconstituted and is sounding fantastic. Over the past year they have been featured in concert on WQXR, they were presented by the Metropolitan Museum in a Christmas concert in its Medieval Sculpture Hall and we are looking ahead to recording possibilities."

Morningside Heights synergy

Since joining the faculty of the Manhattan School of Music as director of choral activities in 2008, Tritle has not only expanded the school's choral program, but he has broadened the scope of the vocal ensembles' activities so that they are increasingly integrated into New York's professional concert scene. In 2011-12, the symphonic chorus performed Walton's "Henry V" with the New York Philharmonic, and members of the chamber choir joined the orchestra for its season-ending extravaganza, "Philharmonic 360," at the Park Avenue Armory last June.

This season, Tritle is creating synergy between his two Morningside Heights homes. Two Manhattan School of Music symphonic chorus concerts featuring organ will take place at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine; a program led by Philippe Entremont featuring Poulenc's Gloria and Saint-Saëns's Symphony No. 3, "Organ," for which Tritle will be soloist is on Feb. 8; and a concert led by Tritle featuring British organist and composer David Briggs's transcription of Mahler's Symphony No. 2, "Resurrection," for organ, chorus, and soloists, a project commissioned by the Cathedral on April 12. Also, the MSM Chamber Choir and Chamber Ensemble will perform Monteverdi's "Vespers of 1610" in the glorious Cathedral setting on April 10.

Carnegie Hall and beyond

When Tritle leaves the neighborhood to perform, he often makes a beeline for Carnegie Hall. As the music director of both the Oratorio Society of New York and Musica Sacra, he leads three of the Christmas season's most prominent performances of Handel's "Messiah" (one with OSNY, and two with



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Musica Sacra) at Carnegie. The Oratorio Society has called the hall home since its opening in 1891, and later this season Tritle leads the ensemble in repertoire ranging from the New York premiere of Paul Moravec's "The Blizzard Voices," an oratorio about the Great Plains blizzard of 1888 (March 5), to Benjamin Britten's massive War Requiem (April 22). Musica Sacra's season-opening concert featuring the rising young opera star Susanna Phillips—with whom Tritle has worked since her student days at Juilliard—took him to Lincoln Center, and he will lead that group at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle for a concert of Magnificat settings in the spring (May 15).

On the organ and on the air

In addition to conducting the cathedral's choral forces, Tritle is also its organist, along with Raymond Nagem, whom Tritle appointed as the Cathedral's associate organist. Tritle is an internationally acclaimed soloist and his Jan. 16 recital at the cathedral—on its Great Organ, one of the world's most renowned instruments—will be released on the Pro Organo label. Add to the mix that he is also the organist of the New York Philharmonic and the American Symphony Orchestra, and occasionally he has days like a recent Saturday when a last-minute program change led him to dash from a concert at Avery Fisher Hall via the No. 1 train to enable him to get to the organist's bench for the second half of a Philharmonic program.

350 Kent Tritle works on a weekly basis with more than 350 choral singers in Manhattan.

Finding Music in Many Forms

Kent Tritle's music can be found on disc and his radio show can be streamed on demand.

Latest recording

Out last summer and already gaining national interest, Kent Tritle's newest recording, "Messages to Myself," includes five new a cappella works performed by choral group Musica Sacra. They were presented in their world premiere (Daniel Brewbaker's "Mother, Father," a setting of e.e. cummings text; and Michael Gilbertson's "Three Madrigals after Dowland") and New York premiere (Zachary Patten's Magnificat, Behzad Ranjbaran's "We Are One," and Christopher Theofanis's "Messages to Myself") performances on May 13, 2011. This MSR Classics release is Kent Tritle's first recording with Musica Sacra and the revival of the ensemble's recording tradition that includes more than 10 releases on the RCA, Deutsche Grammophon, and BMG (Vanguard) labels.

One his most acclaimed recent discs is "Wondrous Love," also on MSR Classics, an album of a cappella works spanning 1,000 years of sacred music repertoire with the Choir of St. Ignatius Loyola, about which American Record Guide said, "This is one of the albums I'd pull out in a flash to prove to fussy skeptics that America has church choirs that needn't take a back seat to the best European ones." For a full discography, visit kenttritle.com.

Weekly radio show

"The Choral Mix with Kent Tritle," airing Sundays at 7 a.m. and 11 p.m. on WQXR, explores the vibrant and transformative world of choral music. Each week, Kent focuses on a different aspect of the choral scene in New York and beyond. Recent shows have included "Musical Americana" and "Choral Thrillers for All Saints Day" (the Halloween show). Past episodes can be streamed on-demand at wqxr.org/programs/choral.

Contact info:

For information on "Great Music in a Great Space" at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, visit stjohndivine.org/GMGS.html. For information about events at the Manhattan School of Music, visit msmny.edu/Concertgoer. For additional information on Tritle, see kenttritle.com, facebook.com/kenttritle, twitter.com/kenttritle.