

Rotz Finds Similarity Between Butchering And Conducting

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Franklin Co. Correspondent
McCONNELLSBURG (Fulton Co.) — Richard Rotz is just as comfortable talking about commissioned choral works as he is about dry-cured country ham.

Rotz, 52, is a partner in his family's business, Rotz Meats, near McConnellsburg, and the conductor of the Mercersburg Area Community Chorus. Classical music has been a large part of his life for many years.

"I took piano lessons as a child," he said, "but I didn't take it seriously until I got into high school." He joined the Columbia Record Club's classical division, and received one record a month. "I got to know a lot of music that way."

"I knew instantly — I vividly remember the moment — that I knew I was going into music," Rotz said. He was playing percussion during band practice at McConnellsburg High School, but didn't have anything to play at the moment. "I was listening to the music, and I thought, 'This is great!' I'm sure the Lord had a lot to do with it."

After receiving a bachelor of arts degree in music education from Lebanon Valley College and a master's in music from the University of Michigan, he taught music at James Buchanan High School in Mercersburg from 1965-1979. He was not involved in Rotz Meats during those years.

A resident of Mercersburg in Franklin County, Rotz helped to

start the Mercersburg Area Community Chorus in 1975, and has conducted all its concerts except the first one. The chorus, which has about 110 members from the tri-state area, was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1980. It gives five performances a year in the arched Gothic cathedral on the grounds of the Mercersburg Academy.

"One of the reasons we organized the chorus was that building," Rotz said. "It just cries out for the kind of music we perform."

While Rotz is highly skilled as a conductor, he admits freely that he has "a terrible voice."

"(The chorus members) are the makers of the sound," he said. "Music is in your head."

As part of the 100th anniversary celebration of Mercersburg Academy, the chorus performed a commissioned 12-minute cantata, "For You O Democracy," based on the texts of Walt Whitman. The composer, Lee Hoiby of Long Eddy, New York, was present.

A committee of three people, including Rotz, began the search for the cantata's composer several months ago. They contacted experts in the field for recommendations, and chose 35 composers from their suggestions. They invited those 35 to submit music, specifying a lyrical, 20th-century romantic style.

"We didn't want anything avant garde," he said.

Twenty-five composers applied for the commission by submitting tapes and scores as samples of their style. The committee chose Hoiby to write the piece.

"Lee Hoiby is nationally known as a fine composer," Rotz said. "He's in the upper echelon, (but) we chose him because of his music, not his reputation."

It took Hoiby about three months to compose "For You O Democracy."

Rotz, who enjoys a variety of classical music, hesitates to choose a favorite work or composer.

"Great music lasts," he said. "You get to know it by listening to it many times. It has a great inner beauty and inner rightness that stands the test of time."

Classical music plays in one of the back rooms at the butcher shop, where Rotz can enjoy it while he works.

Rotz's parents started the meat business in the 1940s on a farm about a mile from the present location. He and his sister, Marion Walker, and her son, Stephen, run the business with the help of five employees. Their mother, Beulah, 87, helps to trim meat. Marion's husband, Charles, operates the farm beside the shop, raising about two-thirds of the hogs processed there.

The division of labor is not clear-cut. "We all do anything that's to be done," Marion said.

"That works best," Rotz added. "We're a close family."

Over the meat case in their red-and-white wallpapered salesroom are wooden cut-outs of pigs with revolving tails. Most of the customers who enter are known to the Rotz family, even those who come from as far away as Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

What they come for is the country-cured ham and bacon, and the sausage, puddin' and ponhaus made in the shop.



Richard Rotz is equally at home in front of a piano or in his family business, Rotz Meats.



Richard Rotz checks hams in the drying room. The hams lose weight as they dry, but no water is added.

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