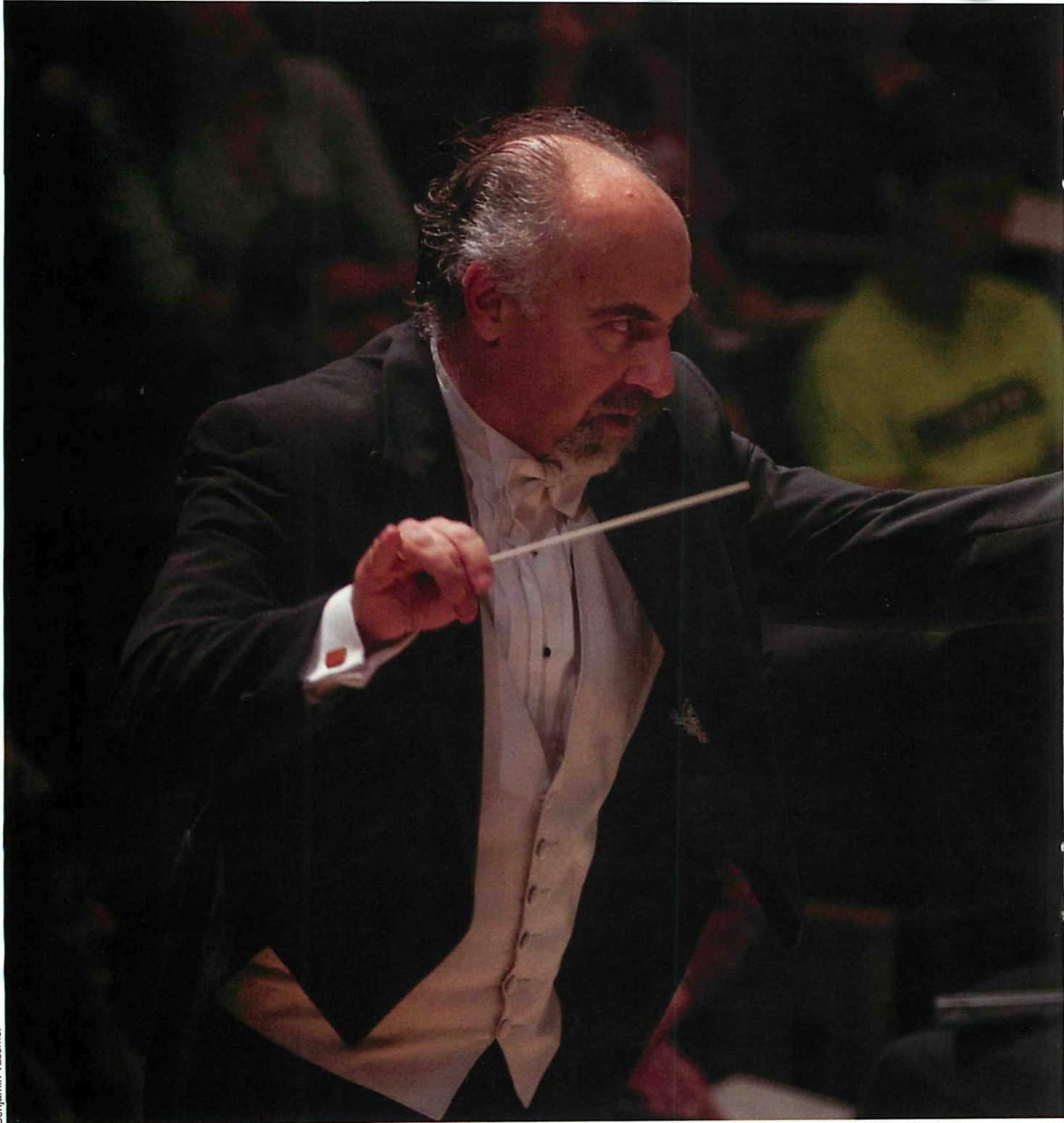


# Joining the Sooner Sing-a-Long



Benjamin Vassmer

*Choral music, a part of the OU scene from its earliest days, is being revitalized as students from across the campus are recruited for a variety of newly organized vocal groups.*

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

**R**ichard Zielinski was walking around the University of Oklahoma's Norman campus, mulling over a job offer to head the University's choirs. Student faces staring back at him from across a century—frozen in historic photos on walls throughout the campus—helped him make up his mind.

What he saw were images of OU's earliest glee clubs and choirs, going back nearly to the founding of the University in 1890. For Zielinski, it was photographic proof that vocal music has long been at the heart of the OU student experience.

"They told me this was a campus that was involved in singing, and singing was a part of campus life that pulled people together," says OU's new director of choral activities.

Vocal music is pulling millions of people together weekly around the television to follow such sensations as "American Idol," "Glee" and "The Sing Off." At the same time, OU is bringing its varied vocal resources under one umbrella that is big enough for everyone who loves to sing.

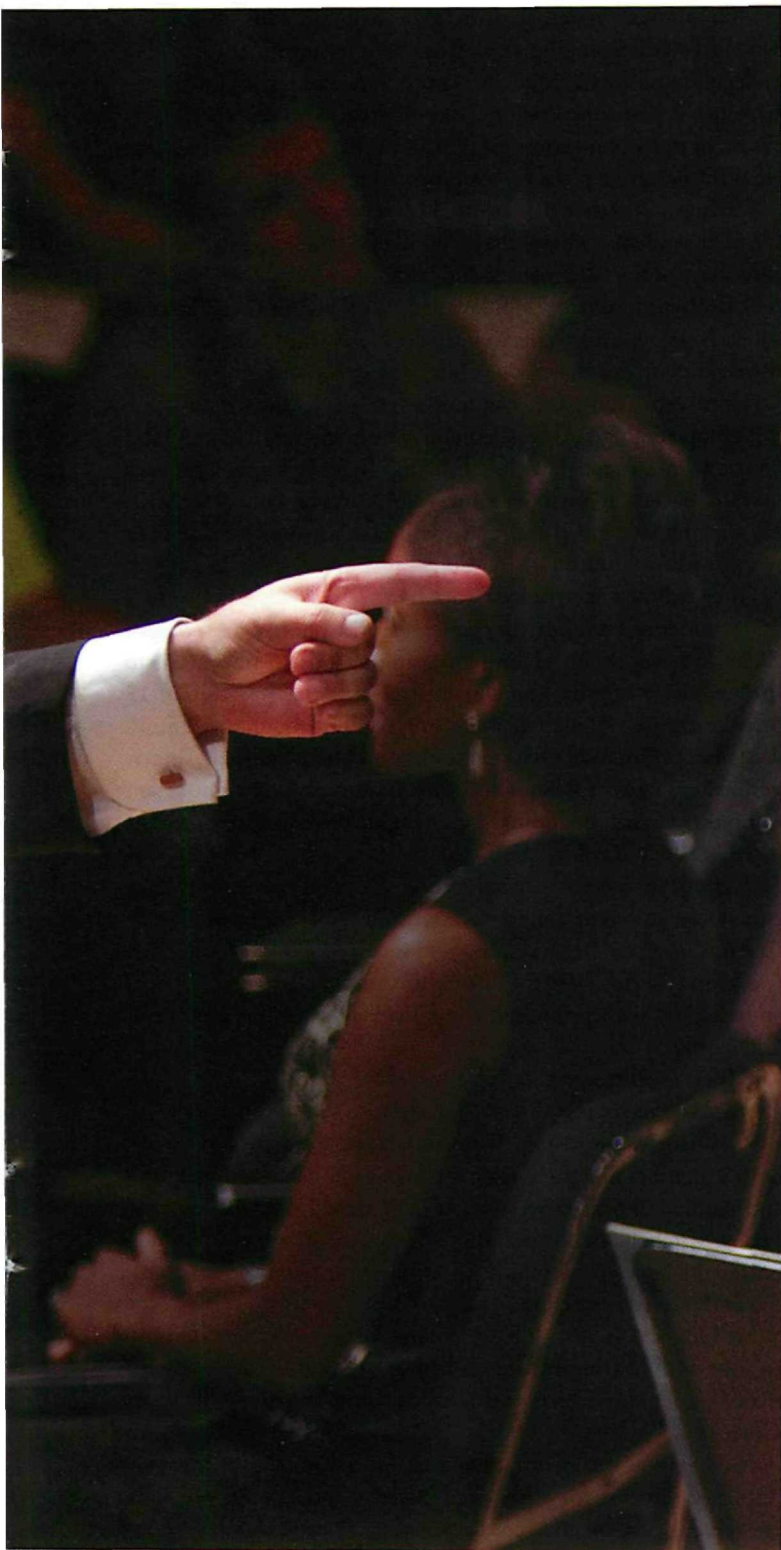
"We're at the beginning of a new renaissance that will help people sing and take our great choirs and make them even better," says Rich Taylor, dean of OU's Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts.

The renaissance started with a gathering of OU's vocal music directors to rename and regroup several longtime choirs. Now, students have opportunities to join the University Singers, University Chorale, University Chamber Singers and, for those lovers of even earlier music, the Collegium Musicum.

*continued*



Benjamin Vassmer



---

The dynamic Dr. Z—Richard Zielinski—came to the University of Oklahoma to build on tradition. His assignment is to pull together and repackage OU's historically strong vocal music groups to offer entertainment to audiences campuswide and opportunities to majors and nonmajors alike who simply love to sing.



Benjamin Vassmer

In addition to performing with their individual choral groups, singers at OU also come together for larger musical productions, such as the Mozart concert in October 2009.

“In some aspects, what I’m trying to do is like rebuilding a team,” says Zielinski, a former college football player who admits he has followed OU’s athletic traditions as much as its musical traditions. The newest member of the team will be the Singing Sooners, a co-ed show choir that will hold auditions next fall to perform musical theater, pop music, Broadway numbers and OU spirit songs for University events and concerts.

Each group will have a specific musical function, Zielinski says, yet can be combined for such projects as opera choruses and large musical productions. Already, the combined choirs have performed in Mozart’s “Requiem” and Mendelssohn’s “Elijah.” They also have taken Owen Field for a special halftime show in honor of Veterans’ Day.

“It’s a wonderful concept,” OU School of Music Director Steven Curtis says of the new focus. “It includes people.”

Those included, as always, are music majors and non-majors. The difference now is that OU’s School of Music can use e-mails to actively recruit non-major freshmen who have participated in high school or church choirs. Students are identified by a software program Zielinski helped develop at the University of South Florida. This virtual welcome mat increased the number of students auditioning for placement in OU’s choirs by nearly

30 percent in just one year, Curtis says.

“I’m always amazed that there are so many kids on campus who loved either singing or playing, yet they don’t continue it in college. Those are the folks we want to tap, along with those who have never performed before,” says Curtis, who earned his OU Ph.D. in music education in 1986. “Our basic philosophy is that we want to have a place for everyone who wants to sing.”

Zielinski says that the required placement audition is as simple as a student visiting the School of Music during the first three days of the fall semester and “singing out any familiar song, melody, hymn, tune or popular song. We’ll have an accompanist for each singer. I just want to hear a person’s voice, and we’ll find the right choir for them,” he adds.

Until the 1960s, OU students were never shy about making group singing part of their college experience. Zielinski and Curtis acknowledge that glee clubs and fraternity serenades have taken a back seat in today’s incredibly diverse college culture. Yet they hope that OU students will take a closer look at their school’s history to find inspiration.

They will not have to look very hard.

If students examine the same historic photos that caught Zielinski’s eye, they will find that singing was so important to their predecessors that the University featured a glee club of 12 men at a time when there were only eight seniors on campus. The first editions of OU yearbooks show that student singers performed across Oklahoma Territory and at every important campus occasion, including the laying of the cornerstone of the new University Hall in 1906.

Fight songs were so central to OU college life that more than two dozen different songs were written—including the familiar *OU Chant* by 1927 alumna and faculty member Jessie Lone Clarkson. By the 1930s, OU’s music students were considered ambassadors who promoted the University and the arts across Oklahoma.

“There is a lineage here,” Zielinski says.

That lineage points directly toward fine arts’ Dean Taylor, ’72 BFA. Taylor came to OU from his native Enid, where he was both a member of a three-time state championship football team and studied choir with classmate and famed operatic soprano Leona Mitchell. Taylor maintained his dual interests as a walk-on for the Sooners who later auditioned for bandleader and radio and television personality Fred Waring, known as “The Man Who Taught America to Sing.” Taylor left OU for nine months to tour with Waring before returning to become a vocal music major under such voice professors as Thomas Carey and Bruce Govich.

Taylor then served for nine years as assistant producer and publicity director for “The Fred Waring Show” and as a soloist, choral singer and conductor for Waring’s “The Young

Pennsylvanians” touring company.

“And then,” Taylor says with a smile, “I married the star of the show.” He and his wife, Andy Everroad Taylor, now on the staff of the OU Visitor Center, soon began a new adventure when he accepted a job as stage performances director for Walt Disney World. Twenty-six years later, Taylor retired as vice president of entertainment and costuming. Initially lured back to OU to direct the musical theatre program, Taylor as fine arts dean never lost sight of his first love, choral music, and the possibilities that pursuit could present for students.

It is an area, Zielinski points out, that provides a top-notch education as broad in discipline as any offered on the Norman campus.

“I feel so fortunate to be in singing, because I learn so much,” he says. “I educate people through the medium of choral music, but we’re studying history, poetry, religion and social and economic elements. I teach songs in five different languages. Some songs were written this year, while others stretch back to the Baroque period.”

OU has been educating through choral music from its beginnings, Taylor notes. The University’s first dean of fine arts, Fredrik Holmberg, had established two glee clubs and a chorus within six weeks of his arrival on the OU campus in 1903.

“From the history of the first dean of the college, through people like Dr. Russell Mathis and Dennis Shrock, to our current professors, we’ve had a great tradition and heritage of top-quality, well-known people leading our choral program,” Taylor says.

“When you think of the number of students and audience members that they have impacted along the journey, who went on to either become educators, or choir directors, or to sing in choirs, or to just have a profound love of music, it’s a tremendous benefit.

“I think people are better because music is in their lives. We use music during the happiest and the saddest times of our lives and every time in between.”

Not incidentally, Taylor recalls that some of his happiest times involve his years as a member of OU’s Beta Theta Pi fraternity. He talks fondly of “The Beta Songbook,” musical numbers sung during pinning ceremonies, at formal dinners and while serenad-



The revitalized choral program took an unusual route to introduce the singers to the Sooner Nation by appearing on Owen Field as part of the Pride of Oklahoma’s halftime show during the OU-Texas A&M game on November 14, 2009. A new co-ed show choir forming in the fall, the Sooner Singers, will perform a variety of musical genres for University events and concerts.

ing sororities. “The singing tradition at OU has some great highlights,” he says.

Some of those highlights are slowly coming back into style. Taylor’s fellow Beta alumnus Richard Anderson, ’55 BFA and ’59 MFA, has spent the past three years helping the Beta house form a new singing troupe called The Beta Dragons.

The eight-member group has been featured at national and regional fraternity gatherings and has performed before OU basketball games and during award presentation nights for Sooner Scandals and University Sing. The Dragons also have cut a CD of traditional Beta songs and are strongly supported by alumni who feel that singing was vital to their OU experience.

“I found singing to be one of the most gratifying things in my University life,” says Anderson, an OU adjunct voice instructor who retired from a major opera career with national companies that included the Metropolitan Opera and the San Francisco Opera. “It made me very, very happy here.”

Zielinski understands that feeling, which he says goes both to the heart of music and the heart of student life. In the end, music’s ability to lift people up may be the one thing that can span cultures—even history—as OU builds bridges between people, its rich musical legacy and a new singing renaissance.

“Singing is the universal language,” he says. “America has become so diverse; what is going to bring us together? I see how singing can unite people from all different walks of life. The more we sing together, the more we learn how much we share, rather than how different we are.”

*Anne Barajas Harp is a freelancer writer living in Norman.*