



Berkshire Concert Choir

≡≡≡Key Notes≡≡≡

Fall, 2025

Ryan José LaBoy on *Sacred Place*

What inspired you to choose the diverse themes and forms of the program of *Sacred Place*?

Last spring, as I was beginning to plan our season, I reconnected with a friend who shared a perusal score and recording of *Sacred Place* by Alex Berko. She was so impassioned about the piece that I felt I needed to give it a look. Immediately after opening the score and listening to the recording, I sensed it was meant to be the center of our concert this fall. Why? I didn't yet know, but I trusted my intuition. (It's helpful to consider that artists can seldom will or conjure inspiration. Rather, our job is to stay open until inspiration, just like lightning, strikes!) So, I leaned into the dual meaning of the word *conductor* as both "one who leads a musical ensemble" and "a medium through which energy is transferred" and stayed curious.

Before long, I became fascinated by the reverent and contemplative nature of the music: it is circular and cyclical, like the changing of seasons or the passing of the day. At one point,



Photo by Barbara Schmick

Ryan José LaBoy conducts at the Linde Center at Tanglewood in May, 2025.

I closed my eyes and imagined walking a labyrinth as I listened, and thought, "Well, there's an idea! What if we sang around a labyrinth? What might our audience members set down or pick up at the center of a musical labyrinth that invites them to emerge differently and freer than when they entered?"

Then, I began to imagine the structure of our concert as a labyrinth, too, asking "If *Sacred Place* is at the center, what music might represent our entry into it, and what could represent our coming out of it?" Though it is structured after a Jewish prayer service, *Sacred Place* is

primarily a piece about nature and stewardship. If that's at the center, I see Whitacre's *Five Hebrew Love Songs* as a series of love letters – not between two people, but rather between the Creator and Creation – guiding us toward *Sacred Place*. On the other side of the program, I see Paulus's *Hymn to the Eternal Flame* as both a benediction and an awakening. It's the realization that our care for the planet is intimately and inextricably connected to our care for each other, across generations and time.

Some parts of the program include non-religious lyrics

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Members of Berkshire Concert Choir painting our labyrinth on Saturday, October 25.

Labyrinths

A brand new canvas labyrinth, painted by chorus members, will beckon audience members to walk through it during the *Sacred Place* performance. But the concept of walking the labyrinth is actually an ancient one. Labyrinths have been found in many cultures, and their circular patterns date back more than 4,000 years. The most famous Christian labyrinth is that of Chartres Cathedral in France, built during the 13th century. Its design has 11 circuits, or times the path passes between the center and the edge. The labyrinth serves as a symbolic representation of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, allowing worshippers to experience a spiritual journey without leaving the cathedral!

In recent years, since around 1995, labyrinths have been

popping up in the United States and around the world. At that time, Rev. Dr. Laurie Artress of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco founded the non-profit, Veriditas, with the goal of “peppering the planet with labyrinths,” which she described as “a tool for transformation, a path to healing and wholeness.” This group has done much to support the modern interest in labyrinths.

Today, there are over 6,000 labyrinths worldwide (including the one created by chorus members for our *Sacred Place* performance, using the design and materials provided by InnateCreations of Vermont). These labyrinths can be found not only in places of worship, but also in hospitals, parks, spa resorts, at colleges, prisons and many other settings.

Labyrinths have been de-

scribed as “ancient meditation paths.” All labyrinths have one continuous path winding to the center and back out. Unlike mazes, which have many paths and are designed as puzzles meant to confuse, labyrinths are meant to foster meditation and peaceful reflection. You can’t get lost in a labyrinth.

Tips on walking the labyrinth

- Wearing comfortable shoes, especially when walking an outdoor labyrinth, can be helpful.
- Take a moment to relax and reflect; perhaps set an intention for your walk.
- Release concerns and quiet the mind.
- Be respectful of others walking the labyrinth.
- Receive what benefits the moment offers, and carry them into your life.

— Eva Sereghy

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presented in the format of Jewish religious observance, others are sung in Hebrew. What is your relationship to Jewish culture or Judaism?

I did not explicitly set out to program a Jewish concert. My personal connection to Jewish culture and Judaism is limited. But, as an artist, rather than saying “no” to an idea too quickly or walking away from it because it’s scary or sensitive, I challenged myself to stay open and curious about what inspiration was coming to me. I say this, too, with full trust in the generosity of our singers. If we didn’t have such a curious and caring group, this program would not be possible.

As I grappled with the Jewish through-line in our concert, and worried about whether or not this was the time to sing this music, I found courage in the words of Leonard Bernstein who once said, “This shall be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before.” In a time of great suffering, both in Gaza and globally, I see our concert not as an effort to be radically political, but rather as an effort to be deeply human. I hope that *Sacred Place* creates a space for us not to solve, but to more thoughtfully consider the complexity of our lives *together*. As I think we’re all learning through Berkshire Concert Choir: when we sing to the center of issues that confound us, we are *all* richer for it. ♫



Dr. Jason Kittler

Singing & Blood Pressure

For the second consecutive singing “semester,” choristers Dr. Jason Kittler (tenor) and Registered Nurse Susan Donoughe (alto) have offered blood pressure screenings to interested singers during rehearsals.

“The upper systolic BP is a measure of the amount of pressure the heart has to generate to push blood through the arteries. The lower diastolic BP measures the amount of pressure left in the system as the heart is trying to relax between beats. In general, lower readings are better. High BP is linked to many serious health problems. Often blood pressure medications only lower readings a few points.

“So far, our measurements show that both systolic and diastolic blood pressure readings are often lower after singers have been singing. Heart rates also decreased. So activities like singing can naturally lower BPs.”

Frequently chorus members, including Jason, mention how much better they feel after

they’ve come to rehearsals, perhaps at the end of a particularly stressful day. Jason reflects, “As a chorus, we’re a community, and taking blood pressures is a simple thing I can do for this community.” ♫



Aaron Likness

At the Keyboard

This fall, Berkshire Concert Choir is fortunate to welcome Aaron Likness as our rehearsal and performance pianist. A native of North Carolina who now resides in upstate New York, Aaron studied piano at UNC-Chapel Hill and New England Conservatory, winning awards and accolades for musical composition and performance. His extensive resume includes widely varying and very well received collaborations and performances in many important settings and venues in the U.S. and Europe. He has a special enthusiasm for new music.

In his work with our chorus, Aaron contributes a gracious, patient and approachable presence along with his superb musicianship. ♫



Suzanne Pelton

From the President

This fall, our Berkshire Concert Choir family is the largest it's ever been since 1977: 104 singers, up from 83 last spring

— what a joy to see our community thriving! Many Boards grapple with how to expand their organizations, and we've had those same conversations. I believe the answer is simple: find a dynamic Artistic Director. We are so fortunate to have that in the inspired Ryan LaBoy.

Singers drawn to our special blend of music, purpose, and connection—with plenty of laughter thrown in—are finding their way to Berkshire Concert Choir and it's wonderful to welcome so many new members. Thanks to the input

many of you provided on your registration forms, we're able to tap into your experience and expertise. A big shout-out to our all-volunteer Production, Marketing, Fundraising, and Operations teams for making it all happen behind the scenes.

Our Board has expanded to 14 directors, and even more volunteers have stepped forward to share their skills. Looking ahead, our Nominating Committee will be seeking new members in January. If you'd like to get more involved, I'd love to hear from you! 

Attend the Sacred Place Concert

November 15 & 16

Zion Lutheran Church Common Room
74 First Street, Pittsfield, MA

Limited seatings: 3:00, 4:30 and 6:00 pm

Adults \$20

Students and Seniors \$15

Members of other choruses \$10

SNAP/EBT Cardholders \$5

Children 12 and younger free

Tickets may be available at the door.

Due to limited seating, purchasing tickets online at berkshireconcertchoir.org is highly recommended.

Learn More

More information about Ryan José LaBoy and the Choir can be found on the website:

berkshireconcertchoir.org

For general inquiries:

info@berkshireconcertchoir.org.

Support the Choir

Donations can be sent to:

P.O. Box 1821

Lenox, MA 01240



BERKSHIRE CONCERT CHOIR PRESENTS

Sacred Place

An intimate and immersive journey of self-reflection, connection, and creation, inspired by Jewish heritage.

Saturday, November 15th & Sunday, November 16th

PERFORMANCE TIMES
3:00 pm, 4:30 pm & 6:00 pm

LOCATION
Zion Lutheran Church
74 First St., Pittsfield, MA