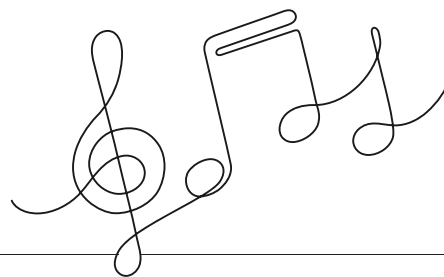


SPOTLIGHT ON

EVERETT McCORVEY



Everett McCorvey visits the Keeneland paddock before heading track-side to sing "God Bless America" on Heroes Day in April.



Leading With Joy

UK OPERA THEATRE DIRECTOR
EVERETT McCORVEY HAS
A GROWING RÉSUMÉ AS
A SOUGHT-AFTER **GUEST
CONDUCTOR** AND THE
DRIVING FORCE BEHIND
**THE AMERICAN SPIRITUAL
ENSEMBLE** AND
THE NATIONAL CHORALE

By Rich Copley / Photos by Anne M. Eberhardt



As the oversized American flag unfurls on the track, McCorvey helps stir the Keeneland crowd with his rich voice.

E

EVERETT MCCORVEY WANTED to make sure the “It’s a Grand Night for Singing” audience knew the chorus was singing about love — not a sluggish l-uh-v, but a soaring, full, capital L love, he told the singers at a Saturday morning rehearsal in late May.

As the chorus of more than 30 voices resumed the song and rapturously declared, “I think I am falling in LOVE!,” their song spilling out the open windows of the Schmidt Vocal Arts Center rehearsal room and onto the Univer-

sity of Kentucky campus, McCorvey broke into a wide smile familiar to Lexington music fans and, increasingly, audiences around the world.

For nearly 30 years, McCorvey has led the University of Kentucky Opera Theatre, a role that has put him and his students in front of far more than just the audiences that turn out for productions of grand operas by Mozart, Puccini, and the like. There are programs like the annual “It’s a Grand Night for Singing” concerts of favorite show tunes and pop songs; the holiday season “Celebration of Song” events; concerts by McCorvey’s American Spiritual Ensemble; and rousing appearances at University of Kentucky basketball games and Keeneland race meets.

“Being around him, you can feel his joy for singing and for music ... not just listening to him and thinking, ‘He has an incredible voice,’ but he creates an atmosphere around him when he’s performing,” said Kara Heissenbuttel, senior director of community relations for Keeneland.

Heissenbuttel said McCorvey’s appearances at Keeneland’s annual Heroes Day to sing “God Bless America” and to lead the crowd in song — much like he does with the national anthem at UK games — have become fan favorites, as are performances at the track of the national anthem by UK voice students.

“It’s obvious that someone has prepared them for the experience that they’re going to have, and you can tell that they take great pride in

having that opportunity,” Heissenbuttel said of the UK voice students and noted that those national anthem performances at Keeneland are broadcast to all locations that receive the track’s simulcast signal.

McCorvey said, “When I’m performing there, I feel like I’m performing for an international audience, an audience that attends the Met, an audience that attends Chicago Lyric or San Francisco, an audience that goes to Paris and goes all over the world to hear, to experience fine arts and great art. So I want to make sure that if we send students out to sing the national anthem or to perform out there, that it’s of a certain quality that people who travel internationally will recognize as being of quality.”

BRINGING A DIFFERENT VIBE

Chances are some of those well-traveled music lovers could find McCorvey on stages far beyond the Bluegrass. In the last decade, his national and international résumé has grown, and he has largely done it on his own terms with a focus on

promoting and growing American music and, inspired by his own upbringing in Montgomery, Alabama, during the Civil Rights Movement, creating access for others to the stages he’s been invited to perform on.

Since 1995, McCorvey has toured internationally with the American Spiritual Ensemble, a group he formed that is dedicated to preserving the American Negro spiritual songs sung by slaves. But the expansion of his personal résumé began in 2014 when he stepped in to lead New York’s National Chorale, which performs in the iconic Lincoln Center.

Harned, Kentucky, native and UK alumna Myra Tobin, an insurance executive and philanthropist in New York, was on the board of the chorale when its founder and only music director, Martin Josman, became ill in 2014. Years before, McCorvey and Tobin had struck up a friendship when she saw him perform and began following his endeavors. She asked McCorvey if he would consider being an interim director for the chorale, which McCorvey sang in when he was a young singer living in New York.



*Discover Kentucky's premier destination for
opulent furnishings, curated objet d'art,
and exquisite wedding registry.*

 SYERS
BROWNING

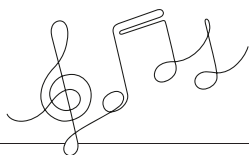
949 National Ave.
Suite 175
Lexington, KY 40502
www.syersbrowning.com 859.407.1700

SPOTLIGHT ON

EVERETT McCORVEY



Everett and Alicia McCorvey with their son David and friend Jade Baker enjoy a spring day at Keeneland.



**"I GET EXCITED ABOUT ANY PROJECT WHERE
WE CAN COLLABORATE WITH PEOPLE AND
MAKE UNIQUE THINGS HAPPEN."**

— EVERETT McCORVEY

"After I said yes, I thought to myself ... there's so many people in New York and around that you could probably ask to do this," said McCorvey, who met his wife, soprano Alicia Helm, in New York. They have three children.

But Tobin insisted and McCorvey proceeded to put his own mark on the ensemble, starting with its signature sing-along — or "sing-in" as the chorale calls it — of George Frideric Handel's

"Messiah" in December 2014.

"The governor of Kentucky showed up," National Chorale Board Chair Judith Rinearson marveled. "And, by the way, the governor of New York has never been to the National Chorale."

Then-Gov. Steve Beshear was indeed in the audience with his score, along with then-Lexington Mayor Jim Gray, participating in the event that changed the trajectory of McCorvey's career. Not long after Tobin invited McCorvey to be the chorale's interim director, Josman passed away, and that night Tobin, who died in 2021, announced McCorvey as the chorale's new artistic director.

"Everett was wonderful," Rinearson said of his early days with the chorale. "He brought in new, amazing soloists. At our board meetings, we were laughing again. I'm smiling as I'm talking to you. It was just fun having him there. We were all immediately saying, 'Thank God we did this.'"

"It's good for him, it was good for us. And he's really turned us around. We were losing money every year, and it's turned us around financially. We have a bigger following. And did you see our New York Times review?"

The paper of record had not covered the chorale for years, but this past December critic Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim wrote up McCorvey's 10th anniversary "Messiah Sing-In," recounting how he led the audience/choir in vocal warmups before the music began.

"Punctuated by laughter and whoops, this 'Messiah' unfolded in an atmosphere somewhere between a singing competition and SantaCon," the critic wrote. "It also drew one of the most diverse crowds I have seen at Gef-

fen Hall and one of the most joyous and colorful, with many participants sporting light-up garlands and 50 shades of red sweaters."

After that first "Messiah Sing-In," artist manager Matthew Laifer approached McCorvey and asked if he had management. McCorvey was flattered but didn't pursue it as the chorale was his only personal endeavor outside UK, and the Spiritual Ensemble had its own management. A year later, McCorvey hired a soloist Laifer



"It's a Grand Night for Singing" has captivated Lexington audiences for 33 years.



"Grand Night" brings together professional and amateur performers in high-quality productions that feature popular music.



The performances always feature the McCorveys singing a duet, which delights the crowd.

represented, and he approached McCorvey again.

"He says, 'I think that you have something to offer to the business, and I think the business needs what you have to offer, and I would really like to represent you and manage you,'" McCorvey recalled. "So I said yes, and we went through the whole process, and I started getting conducting gigs."

McCorvey, who is now represented by Quintana Artist Management, has since added the Virginia Opera; Opera Columbus; the Salt Lake Symphony; the Bay View Music Festival in Petoskey, Michigan; the North Czech Philharmonic; the Mythos Opera

Festival in Italy; and more credits to his résumé.

Recently, McCorvey joined the Recording Academy, the organization that presents the Grammy Awards, among other things.

"Everybody in the industry knows of Everett," said Gabriel Preisser, general director and CEO of Opera Orlando, which just had McCorvey in May for his second engagement with the Florida company. "You know, he just has this wonderful reputation that precedes him, of being so friendly and magnanimous."

In a profession with infamously volatile personalities, McCorvey brings a different vibe.

"There's a different feeling in the rehearsal space when you have Everett as part of your creative team," Preisser said. "That, I think, is a big reason why both of those productions are so successful for us. The cast had great synergy. They all felt at home and were able to really focus on doing their craft as opposed to being nervous or trying to please a taskmaster."

Just over an hour before opening night of June's "It's a Grand Night for Singing" concerts, the chorus was getting final instructions from McCorvey — "Your job tonight is to be at 200%. You have to be excited for the new audience!" — and the show's other directors when the preshow briefing turned to a nightly honor: the good smile awards for performers who had the biggest smiles during the previous night's rehearsal. McCorvey, who would be tough to

SPOTLIGHT ON

EVERETT McCORVEY



McCorvey founded the American Spiritual Ensemble to preserve and promote this distinct American music.

beat in a smile competition, announced some of the honorees himself.

“One of the hallmarks of Everett is he approaches every project with joy, which is infectious,” said Mark Shanda, dean of the University of Kentucky College of Fine Arts. “As a result, I think people work hard for him, and he demands hard work, but he makes the learning process and the creation process and execution process quite engaging and fun.”

ACCESS TO A BROADER STAGE

Part of the joy of this season in McCorvey’s career is that his opportunities are in tune with his passions, Orlando being emblematic of that. His first engagement was conducting the world premiere of “The Secret River” by composer Stella Sung and librettist Mark Campbell, and his return was Scott Joplin’s “Treemonisha,” long considered a “forgotten opera” that McCorvey is helping put in

front of 21st-century audiences.

McCorvey’s interest in championing American music goes back to spirituals, which he sees as the basis on which American sounds like blues and gospel were built. As a nation of immigrants, he notes, many cultures brought over their own music, and it took a while for the United States to develop its own sound.

“It was really after spirituals that America began to find its voice,” McCorvey said, noting the presence of the John Jacob Niles Center for American Music at UK has also influenced his interest in promoting American music.

“We have a lot of stories to tell, and a lot of stories that need to be continued on, and for me, the best way to tell a story is with music,” said Campbell, who has worked with McCorvey several times, including UK Opera’s spring 2025 production of “Sanctuary Road,” which Campbell created with composer Paul Moravec. “So I really prize people like Everett, who are endeavoring every day to help our American stories be told.”

Next spring, UK Opera is presenting another Moravec-Campbell show, “A Nation of Others.”



McCorvey conducts the opera “La Cenerentola” at the Bay View Music Festival in Petoskey, Michigan.

SPOTLIGHT ON

EVERETT McCORVEY



McCorvey rehearses with National Chorale members for a performance of Handel's "Messiah" at Lincoln Center.

McCorvey reflected, "I get excited about any project where we can collaborate with people and make unique things happen."

One of the projects McCorvey is most excited about is a new opera about the life of the late John Lewis, a Civil Rights leader and longtime U.S. representative from Georgia. McCorvey was inspired by an op-ed by Lewis that was posthumously published by The New York Times. He originally thought it would be a great basis for an oratorio and began talking with librettist Diana Solomon-Glover, whom he worked with when he conducted Kentucky Opera's production of "This Little Light of Mine" about Civil Rights icon Fannie Lou Hamer. They brought in composer Maria Thompson Corley and the project quickly turned into an opera, "Good Trouble: The Boy from Troy," that will premiere at the Cincinnati Opera in the summer of 2027 with McCorvey wielding the baton.

"I never met him, but [he] seemed to be such a gentle, peaceful man," McCorvey said of Lewis. "He has always been a hero of mine."

McCorvey experienced the world Lewis, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and others were working to change growing up in Montgomery in the 1960s and early '70s. Among his distinct memories was his mother, a teacher and librarian who had to drive 60 miles each day to work because she could not work in Montgomery where the schools were segregated, and she could only work at Black schools. The University of Alabama had been desegregated less than 10 years when McCorvey enrolled there.

"That was the thing that sort of guided me," McCorvey said. "I wanted to make sure that my students, my kids, all had access, because it was something that I didn't have and my parents didn't have."

McCorvey's father was a postman, and though he supported his son's dream of a music career, he insisted he take the Postal Service exam, because that was one of the good middle-class jobs available to Black people at that time.

People on McCorvey's route would have looked forward to

seeing his smile every day. But instead, he's fulfilling that dream of providing opportunities and access to the next generation of performers. Productions he helms frequently put him in front of aspiring singers deciding where they will go for the next step in their education.

"Everett takes advantage of every opportunity to recruit, which is part of the reason why we have as diverse a student body as we do in our opera program," Shanda, the UK Fine Arts dean, said. "It's been of great benefit, and I've seen him sort of mature, so to speak, into those roles in slightly different ways than just being a standard college professor."

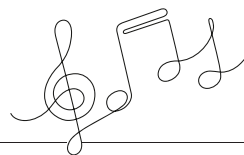
OperaLex President Bonnie Shearer Mays likens McCorvey to the University of Kentucky men's basketball coach constantly working to attract the best talent.

"If you are a student wanting to go into performance or teaching or anything in the opera field, he's just who you want to be with and who you want to study with," said Mays, whose organization has supported UK Opera Theatre by raising funds for everything from sets and costumes to scholarships.

Now, as an added appeal, the students could end up on the stage of Lincoln Center or some other prestigious venues before commencement.

"He has a great ability to understand people's skill sets and then set them loose to do that," said Tedrin Blair Lindsay, pianist, vocal coach, and McCorvey's longtime collaborator. "Sometimes people who are new to Everett are waiting for directives, and what he's done is open the opportunity for you to do your thing."

"It all comes back to wanting to create opportunities that eventually the students can participate in and be bettered by. The reason we have all of these connections throughout the opera and theater world is largely because of Everett, and so all of these students being able to make these connections and have these opportunities and be in these new works and work with living composers ... they all come back to whatever he's trying to do."



"IF YOU ARE A STUDENT WANTING TO GO INTO PERFORMANCE OR TEACHING OR ANYTHING IN THE OPERA FIELD, HE'S JUST WHO ... YOU WANT TO STUDY WITH."

— OPERALEX PRESIDENT BONNIE SHEARER MAYS

Despite the career growth, the acclaim, the exciting opportunities — all increasing demands on his already crammed schedule — McCorvey hasn't considered leaving UK.

"I've tried to be very sensitive in terms of arranging it so that it does not impact negatively on my students," McCorvey said, noting the music school's strong, experienced staff and opportunities to bring in fellow professionals to work with students.

"Working with the students brings me great joy, and I just can't imagine being in an environment where I wasn't able to work with students," McCorvey said, with a wide smile. **KM**



McCorvey has put his own touch on the popular "Messiah" sing-along.