

**Michael Stern**  
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**'Ode to Joy' erupting at GPAC**

**IRIS's weekend program also includes work by Leshnoff**

After 16 years The Gary Beard Chorale has a lot of music under its collective robe. From Handel to Hoagie Carmichael, the group has sung the gamut of secular and spiritual music.

So when Germantown's renowned IRIS Chamber Orchestra asked the ensemble to sing one of the most spiritually secular choral works ever written, Gary Beard leapt at the chance.

In the weeks since rehearsals began for Beethoven's famous Ninth Symphony -- a.k.a. the "Ode to Joy" -- Beard has been learning just how deep that spiritual energy runs.

Last week he handed over the choirmaster's reins to conductor **Michael Stern** and new layers emerged immediately in the 1824 masterpiece.

"I've tried to make sure the text is clean and the tonality even so I could turn it over to Michael," said Beard, who will be joining the choir for the performance. "But he is also putting his own fingerprints on it. At the last rehearsal he really had the choir bring out one word. "Zauber." He's very intent on that word."

Zauber.

Magic, in German.

It's a word that describes the music and its effect on listeners. When **Stern** was planning this season he searched for a spectacular concert for the holiday slot.

The Ninth Symphony, with its poem by Friedrich Schiller, sends a universal message of brotherhood and peace.

It's the biggest musical undertaking in IRIS's five-year history.

"I'm loath to program Beethoven's Ninth casually," **Stern** said. "The piece is enormous. It's an experience that grabs you right from the beginning. When I first conducted it I couldn't wrap my brain around it."

To bring the music to IRIS, he also had to wrap his orchestra around it. It meant increasing the typical orchestra size from 37 to 60.

Beard, whose chorale is based out of Lindenwood Christian Church, had to more than double the size of the choir -- from 24 to more than 50.

It's a tight stage at the 800-seat Germantown Performing Arts Centre. But the intimacy, *Stern* says, is part of what he says may become one of IRIS's most ebullient concerts, which is one reason the orchestra will, for the first time ever, perform two concerts -- Saturday night and a 3 p.m. matinee.

As if it weren't enough, *Stern* also commissioned a new work by Baltimore composer Jonathan Leshnoff.

An Orthodox Jew, Leshnoff, 31, began composing last year with the idea that his work would bestride both the massive Ninth Symphony and Beethoven's "Elegiac Song" for Chorus and Strings, which opens the evening.

He also knew his spirituality would have a role in his composition that sets ancient religious music against contemporary orchestration.

He quotes melodies from 17th Century Jewish composer Salomon Rossi, Renaissance composer Guillaume DuFay and Christian Gregorian Chants.

"The first thing I did was ask what I had to work with," Leshnoff said. "I asked if I could use the choir and Michael said yes. He was looking for a big piece for his orchestra. He wanted something really meaty and gave me the freedom to do what I wanted. So when I finished writing I had five movements, 25 minutes of music and my first symphony."

"Forgotten Chants and Refrains" (Symphony No. 1) for Chorus and Orchestra will be yet another world premiere for IRIS.

Leshnoff, who calls himself a "thinker and a ponderer," says that his spirituality "just sort of found itself."

Like Beethoven before him, he wants to take people on a journey of the soul.

"It's new. It's clothed in the contemporary. It has dissonance, and things that are confronting. When I think about a piece I always ask: Am I taking the listeners with me?"