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The 'Messiah' is coming

By **SETH ASHLEY** of the Tribune's staff

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The vaulted ceiling of the Missouri United Methodist Church seems to rise as the Columbia Chorale rehearses the final triumphant "Amen" of Handel's "Messiah." In an instant, the music stops, but the sound continues to ring out for a full five seconds before the echo dies and silence falls over the empty room.

Part of that effect might be lost when the church fills with more than 700 people on Saturday night to hear the holiday favorite, but the impact will remain. First performed in 1742, Handel's classic work gets the deluxe treatment from the Columbia Chorale, a talented community group of 60 singers whose ages span at least four decades. Just in time for the holidays, they will bring the "Messiah" to life with the help of five soloists and an orchestra of 22 local musicians, including strings, winds, horns, organ and harpsichord.



G.J. McCarthy photos

Conductor Alex Innecco leads the Columbia Chorale in , "Behold the Lamb of God" during practice Monday of Handel's "Messiah" at Missouri United Methodist Church.

"The talent here is amazing," said Rochelle Parker, who plays the church's 1930 organ for the "Messiah" performance. "It's a thrill to work with this group."

Part of the reason for the group's success and growing talent is their leader, Artistic Director Alex Innecco. A native of Brazil, Innecco joined the group less than three years ago after completing his master's degree in choral conducting at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

"I've always worked with community choir, which is something I like very much," Innecco said. "This has been a great experience for me because the group has grown from around 25 to 60 people. And they bought the idea that I tried to sell them, which was that a community group is one of the strongest ways of making music that we have. If we do it right, we can achieve great success and great quality, and that's what I tried to impress on them: The need to reach the full potential of the group."

Now Innecco has realized that potential, and he's out to prove it. This year's presentation of the "Messiah" is an encore performance of Innecco's first concert with the choir group, when they performed "Messiah" in 2003. Even though the chorale's audience had grown that year, a snowstorm kept many of the patrons away, so Innecco wanted another chance to show the community how strong he and his choir have grown.

Innecco has helped with the group's success by donating his salary back to the not-

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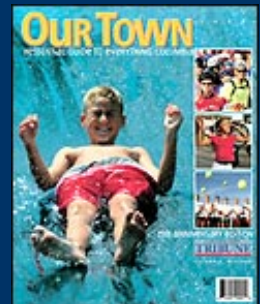
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for-profit organization. That money - along with donations from choir members, aid from the city's Office of Cultural Affairs and a grant from the Missouri Arts Council - helped the group's annual budget grow from \$6,000 in 2003 to \$40,000 this year.

"Our work has been accepted," Innecco said proudly. "We've just been doing big works."

It's all part of Innecco's formula for success. You have to take big steps to get big results. In the new year, the chorale will perform such big works as Verdi's La Traviata in March and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in May.

"It's kind of a lame message to say, 'Oh, please support this choir group, blah blah blah.' People won't come. There's too much going on. I usually say that our biggest competitor is not other choirs or other orchestras - it's TV. People have to decide if they're gonna leave home on a night when it's 22 degrees outside. They're going to watch 'Law and Order' or go to watch a choir. So it has to be compelling. It has to be fun, fresh, new, and that is my biggest concern: Engaging the audience. And it has been working very well. I'm very happy about the results," he said.

Innecco works full time as director of music at Missouri United Methodist Church. He holds rehearsals once a week with the Columbia Chorale, which began work on "Messiah" in August. His light-hearted approach helps keep the singers coming back.

"I want these people to enjoy what they're doing," he said. "Classical music is fun if it's done the way it should be."

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COLUMBIA CHORALE PRESENTS HANDEL'S MESSIAH

When: 7 p.m. Saturday

Where: Missouri United Methodist Church, 204 S. Ninth St.

How much: \$10

Contact: 443-3111

On the Web: www.columbiachorale.com

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