Collegians take on Beethoven

BY RONNI REICH
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

“What does ‘Zauber’ mean?” Joe Miller asks his students.

They look up attentively, but no one raises a hand. After a month of practicing Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the Westminster Symphonic Choir singers know their conductor doesn’t want a definition.

The German word means “magic,” and he wants them to create it.

On Saturday, these 100 juniors, seniors and first-year graduate students from Westminster Choir College, a division of Westminster College of the Arts at Rider University in Princeton, will participate in a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth—one of the most monumental pieces of music ever written—at Carnegie Hall with widely acclaimed conductor Mariss Jansons and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Even in the context of the choir’s frequent Lincoln Hall and Carnegie Hall appearances, this date stands out.

In between exams and papers, recitals, church jobs, teaching jobs, opera rehearsals, and German diction classes, the Symphonic Choir meets for four rigorous hours of rehearsal each week.

Miller, the choir’s conductor, said in a phone interview following a recent rehearsal: “I try to almost overprepare. When we walk into a professional setting, I don’t want anyone to think about the fact these are students. They are equal musicians and partners.”

Students at Westminster enter into a four-year undergraduate program or a two-year graduate program, in which they receive a bachelor of music or arts, or a master of music or arts, to pursue careers in voice, piano or organ performance, music education, sacred music, composition, pedagogy or conducting.

Miller’s Symphonic Choir students share his intensity. Both Mimi Lanseur, a first-year graduate student, and Alex Benestelli, a junior, say they own six or seven recordings of the Beethoven symphony, with its fourth movement featuring the choral “Ode to Joy.”

“Not one has a choir that’s up to par,” Lanseur said of the recordings.

On an average day, she spends about 3½ hours in choir (Westminster [See CHOR, Page 15]
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has eight separate ensembles) and an additional hour practicing independently.

The payoff comes at performance time. The only known choir college in the world, Westminster garners invitations each season to the area's most prestigious venues to collaborate with renowned conductors and orchestras. "There are times when I'm on stage that tears want to come to my eyes," says Brittany Godfrey, a junior.

It is particularly tempting to lose one's stage composure in a work like Beethoven's Ninth, where students are on stage for all four movements but sing only the fourth. "You're a performer, but you're receiving, too," she says. "We have the best seats in the house."

They also have the best teachers. From their many collaborations with artists like Lorin Maazel and Pierre Boulez, students take away valuable lessons and colorful observations.

"Conductors personify the music they specialize in," says graduate student Jackson Borges, citing the stolidity of Kurt Masur, director of the Orchestra National de France and former music director of the New York Philharmonic, and the bouncy energy of Ton Koopman, leader of the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra.

Working with Jansons will be especially gratifying for Alex Benestelli, who grew up in Pittsburgh when the conductor led the Pittsburgh Symphony.

"He's a hero of mine," Benestelli says, lauding the excitement Jansons brings to his work. "I've never seen him finish a performance where he wasn't drenched in sweat."

The type of commitment Benestelli describes is crucial to Beethoven's Ninth, a piece that Miller and his students find especially compelling. When asked what makes people respond to the piece, Miller credits the work's overwhelming joy and visceral power. For students at Westminster, the community feeling resonates on an even more immediate level. "This is a choir-based college," Godfrey says. "We experience it on a daily basis."

If you go

Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, with the Westminster Symphonic Choir

Where: Carnegie Hall, 57th Street and 7th Avenue, New York
When: 8 p.m. Saturday
How much: $34-$105
Call (212) 247-7800 or visit www.carnegiehall.org.