



## SUMMER 2021 MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

**Marsha Toma – Member Conductor’s Circle, Alto 1 Section Leader,  
past Membership Committee Chair, and longtime Vice President and member of  
the OSQ Board of Directors**

*Shining a light on our friends and fellow singers*

Interviewer: Marguerite LeBron

Style, elegance, grace, intelligence – these words come to mind at the mention of Marsha Toma’s name. Having belonged to OSQ since 1995, Marsha is a member of the esteemed Conductors Circle, a distinguished honor which is awarded to people who have sung with the chorus for twenty or more years. Marsha currently serves as Alto 1 Section Leader, with all the responsibilities that position entails, and was formerly Membership Committee Chair as well as being Vice President of OSQ’s Board of Directors and a Board member for many years. During her years on the Board, Marsha established relationships with Arts organizations and other businesses, local politicians, and various influential people throughout Queens. Marsha believes that an important part of being a Board member is reaching out into the community, and she feels that the current Board leadership accomplishes this at a very high level. As a person of numerous varied talents and interests, Marsha is an outstanding representative and spokesperson for OSQ and its members. Recently I reached out to Marsha to have a conversation about many things...

**Q.** What is your first memory of music? How does music make you feel and how do you experience it physically?

**A.** I don’t feel it so much physically as I do emotionally. I have been aware of music from the first time I opened my eyes! It has always surrounded me. My mother was a singer who had been approached to sing with the big bands, but she was forbidden to pursue a professional career by her family. My father played guitar and harmonica. He was completely self-taught. As children, we all received piano lessons, and to this day I still use the piano when I’m practicing my part for OSQ.

**Q.** In what ways has music influenced your life?

**A.** Music has influenced every bit of my life – it’s the soundtrack of my life! When I hear a portion of the Messiah or something from Mozart, it reminds me of people that I know. That soundtrack is always running in my mind. For instance, currently I am studying the Brahms *Requiem* with a virtual choir, called the RunBySingers, which is based in England. Every year they perform the Mozart *Requiem* in Vienna, Austria. This Brahms piece is challenging but I am enjoying learning to sing it.

**Q.** Who are your top 5 favorite composers? Any favorite pieces of theirs?

**A.** Oh, I’m ready for this question! My top 5 favorite composers are Beethoven, Bach, Chopin, Mozart, and Verdi. For Beethoven my favorite piece is *Piano Sonata No. 23, the Appassionata*. Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* is a favorite for singing and for listening! I also love Mozart’s *Requiem*. It has been a joy to sing it with OSQ and with other choruses too. I learned

to play the Chopin Waltzes and Nocturnes when I studied piano and I love them to this day. It would be difficult to choose just one. Verdi's *Requiem* is another favorite of mine. The choruses from many of Verdi's operas are another favorite. Wouldn't it be fun to do an OSQ program of all Verdi choruses?!

**Q.** In your bio/profile you list travel as one of your loves. What and where was your most memorable trip?

**A.** There have been so many memorable trips – Africa, Hungary, Russia, France. I have been to Israel two times, once in 1979 and again in 2011. The most meaningful one was the first time I went to Israel; that was when I experienced the miracle of Israel as the Jewish homeland. I was born the same year as the Jewish state. We had a relative who was a survivor and who moved to Israel. Some of the family are still there. I met a gentleman who returned to Jerusalem every year. You will find that the history, religion, and geography of the place are endlessly fascinating. During this trip I visited Jericho, it was like a paradise! Russia was beautiful and amazing too, but I don't think I would go there now. It's kind of scary.

By heritage I have a Russian background, but my family has always loved America and is very patriotic. When Pearl Harbor was bombed, no one knew where it was or what it was. My parents got married in Pearl Harbor because my father volunteered to help raise the sunken ships. During World War II my father wanted to serve our country, but he was a pacifist and did not want to kill people, so he contributed his skills as a welder to work on the ships in the navy yard in Pearl Harbor. He and my mother corresponded while he was over there, and she convinced him that he was in love with her. They met when she was 13 and he was 15, and she knew even then that she was going to marry him. It was love at first sight for my mother. Anyway, she went to Hawaii to marry my father, and even though it was wartime it was like paradise to them. My older sister was born in Hawaii. As a conscientious objector, my father was not afraid to die but he could not kill anyone because of his profound respect for humanity.

**Q.** I also know you are a movie buff. Care to talk about a favorite film or director? Also, how important do you think the musical score of a film is to the impact of the film as a whole?

**A.** Oh yes, I do want to talk about the movies! My favorite is probably Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*. It's just about perfect; the actors, the story, the authentic locales, and that soundtrack is great! The Coen Brothers *Fargo* is another favorite. That movie has a fantastic soundtrack too. And I can't leave out *The Godfather* by Francis Ford Coppola with another memorable soundtrack. I even have a favorite quote from *The Godfather*.

**Q.** What is it?

**A.** Okay, this is it, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

**Q.** What are your thoughts about the importance of the musical score to the impact of the film as a whole?

**A.** The musical score has a tremendous effect on the impact of a film as a whole. If the music gives you goosebumps or moves you to tears, it has affected you both emotionally and physically.

**Q.** You have been a member of OSQ for more than 25 years. As a member of the very prestigious Conductors Circle, what first brought you to OSQ and why do you keep coming back?

**A.** If I didn't have music, life would just be empty for me. That's what first brought me to OSQ. One of the main reasons I keep coming back to OSQ is David Close and the music he gives us to sing. Haydn, Bruckner, Beethoven, are only a few of the great composers we have sung. The Brahms *Liebeslieder Waltzes* were a challenge to me, but I came to love them. David has impeccable taste and great instinct. Learning these great musical masterpieces has allowed me to participate in some moving and meaningful performances even outside of OSQ. In June I sang the Mozart *Requiem* at the World Trade Center to honor victims of COVID-19 (living and deceased). And in 2011 I was able to participate in an Anniversary Concert, again singing Mozart's *Requiem*, honoring 9-11 victims.

The other reason I keep coming back is to be with the other singers; we have so much in common and we share so many mutual interests. It has been my great good fortune to make many new and lasting friendships over the years.

**Q.** During the past year of COVID-19, many people discovered new interests and hobbies, or reconnected with old favorites. Did this happen for you? What were your newfound or rediscovered interest?

**A.** For me it was discovering, or rediscovering, the pleasure of walking. Getting out in the fresh air and moving around was something I could do during this time period when so many other things were off limits. I really enjoyed the OSQ Harmony Hustle! The other activity I enjoyed were the three virtual choirs that I joined: the RunBySingers, Bel Canto, and of course, OSQ. Singing in a virtual choir was a new experience for me and I found it to be very enjoyable. The RunBySingers is located in England so it is quite exciting to connect with people on the other side of the world. I'm planning to continue my association with these groups.

**Q.** What are your hopes and dreams for OSQ? What excites you about the future for our community chorus? Do you have any messages, insights, or advice you would like to share with your fellow singers?

**A.** My hopes and dreams...my greatest hope is for the continued leadership of the organization. My other hope is for more new members, younger members, and for retaining our current members, and also for the support of the community. What excites me about the future is to be coming back to in person rehearsals and performances, and the new music that David will introduce to us. My advice to my fellow singers is this: Oratorio has changed a lot over the years. It has become friendlier and as a result more people have joined. As a group we are welcoming. Let's continue to build on those strengths, our welcome and our friendship, to keep OSQ strong and moving into the future.