

# Greater South Jersey Chorus to sing the spiritual journey of Underground Railroad

By [P. Kenneth Burns](#)

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Through a mixture of spirituals and a historically-based oratory, [“Let My People Go!”](#) tells the story of the Underground Railroad.

This weekend, [the Greater South Jersey Chorus](#) will present this dramatic work — in collaboration with the [South Camden Theatre Company](#) and [Camden County Historical Society](#) — while giving special attention to some historical sites in South Jersey like the Peter Mott House in Lawnside and Croft Farm in Cherry Hill.

Performances are scheduled for 8 p.m. Saturday at Christ Our Light Catholic Church in Cherry Hill and 3:30 p.m. Sunday at First Nazarene Baptist Church in Camden. Tickets are \$25, with some of the proceeds going toward [repairs at the Peter Mott House](#).

Dr. Christopher Thomas, artistic director for the chorus, selected the work for performance four years ago, after coming off of another “emotionally stirring” project, [“Annelies; a choral work on the life of Anne Frank.”](#)

“What I have found in my work as a choral director is that occasionally doing projects that really kind of broaden your community’s awareness of issues just beyond kind of three- and four-minute pieces of music ... kind of taps into a level of artistry and empathy that otherwise just maybe doesn’t exist,” he said.

Thomas hopes the audience will leave the performance with respect and reverence for the music and the narratives between the songs.

“I don’t want anyone to walk away and say, ‘this is fun,’” he said. “If you say that this was meaningful or you feel more connected to this incredibly bleak part of history, then I think that it’s well done.”

For “Let My People Go!”, two guest speakers from Rowan University and Temple University were brought in to speak about the spiritual as a historical musical genre, but also cultural appropriation. It’s similar to what the organization did for Annelies by bringing in a Holocaust survivor to make it a meaningful experience.

Thomas said chorus members through the conversations were exposed to “not one elephant in the room” but “the herd of elephants in the room.”

“Because of the heightened sensitivity and concern with these topics, I worked really hard to make sure that our choir understood perhaps a little more deeply the risks that

we're taking in singing this music," he explained, "and also some of the areas of respect that I think we should [gain] as a shared community before we entered it."

It's an experience he described as "powerful." Still, the work was selected two years before the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Thomas said while in some ways it's a perfect time to present the work, in other ways "it's a terrifying time." Despite his nervousness, the program will go on.

"Everything is so political now and it certainly wasn't our intent," he said, "but we're also not running away from it."

Like other arts organizations in the days since the Summer of 2020, the Greater South Jersey Chorus has made a pledge to support diversity, equity and inclusion. Part of its "[Black Voices Matter](#)" pledge includes embracing Black choral music and striving for representation "across each program and concert season without tokenizing." Thomas said the organization took their time to craft a pledge.

"We were perhaps a little later than some because we wanted ours to be one that we spent a little more time with as a membership and made sure that we really, truly believed in what we were saying before, before we put it up," he said.