

MICHAEL GRAY | 38



Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I was born and raised in Virginia, which is where I met my wife, Tascha. She was born in Missoula and raised in Helena. We met while singing in an opera together in Virginia, where we were cast as the romantic leads in *Carmen*. Shortly after, we moved to Helena for work in 2020 and married in 2021.

That same year, we both began working as adjunct professors of music at Carroll College, and shortly afterward I became the Choir Director.

OCCUPATION

My occupation is best described as an opera singer and choral conductor, but that work spans many different institutions. I serve as either a singer or conductor or manager for Carroll College, the Helena Symphony, the 204th Army Band, and the Cathedral of St. Helena.

When I was younger, I traveled the country singing opera full-time while living in a camper. Today, I primarily teach at Carroll College and direct the choirs. Of all the opportunities I've had, watching the artist in each chorister blossom has been the most rewarding experience of my professional career.

I am incredibly proud of the work our students have put into the Carroll College choirs, which recently earned an invitation to perform at Carnegie Hall in 2027. We couldn't be more excited to represent Helena on such an iconic New York City stage.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

I think nearly all of my employers could be considered community service or non-profit organizations. So often, I think, "This is just what I do," and I don't spend much time defining it that way. However, so much of our work is centered on bringing music education and performance to the people of Helena.

Whether it's *Symphony Under the Stars* with the Helena Symphony, the Carroll College Choirs singing annually at the *Capitol Christmas Tree Lighting*, adjudicating high school District Music Festivals, or veteran and military appreciation events through the Army Band, nearly all of it is intended to enrich the cultural life of Helena and serve our community. Service to our community and country through music is at the core of each of my jobs.

My most recent labor of love is the co-founding of the Helena Classical Music Festival with my wife, which will premiere this August. We have spent the summer coordinating and fundraising to create additional performance opportunities for classical musicians in Helena while bringing classical music into casual, family-friendly downtown spaces that can inspire the next generation of music lovers.

Helena reminds me of the close-knit

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community where I grew up. It brings back some of the happiest memories of my childhood. Everyone knows everyone, and if you don't know someone directly, you probably know someone close to them.

With every performance given or music lesson taught, you can see the impact ripple through the community. People talk about how moving a choral performance was, how a music lesson inspired someone to join the Helena Symphony Chorale or a church choir, or how it encouraged someone to audition for a solo at Grandstreet Theatre.

What I love most about working with the college and the symphony is seeing people's confidence blossom, not only artistically, but personally. Something changes when they step off the stage and return to the community. That confidence carries forward and resonates throughout

our city.

Music is one of those things we often expect at the most important events in our lives - weddings, funerals, holidays, festivals - it's a grand journey that requires oversight, perpetuating artistry from one generation to the next through inspiring performance and instruction. Often that can mean performing or teaching for the love of it because you believe in the gifts of a student or know the perfect song will make a once in lifetime event more memorable for a family; when you see your work inspire others, it's worth every second.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Helena is the kind of community people idolize. It's the kind of place where people want to raise their families.

I want to contribute to that vision by helping provide inspiring musical experiences, encouraging people to experience classical music through live performance rather than through a screen and headphones, and meeting people where

they already love to gather; places like the Walking Mall or the sledding hill at Carroll College.

More importantly, I see so many others contributing to that same vision and I'm grateful to be a part of such a community. Whether it's museum staff, local businesses participating in the Art Walk, organizers of Alive @ Five, or countless other community leaders, the best parts of a thriving community are already hard at work here and it inspires me to do the same.

What else should people know about you?

My wife and I have a 1-year-old little boy named Roman who is painfully adorable. He is a 5th generation Montanan and I can't imagine raising him anywhere other than Helena.

He loves waving to dogs, eating ground beef and bananas, and humming little tunes because Mommy and Daddy sing far too much at home for entertainment. If you ever see us on a hiking trail, be sure to wave - he'll probably want to say hello!