

## Conducting his way to the top

*Chorale and opera artistic director is a passionate advocate for the arts* BY SARA RIDDLE ('10)



While most third-grade boys dream of lives as firefighters, policemen, and NFL or NBA stars, as an 8-year-old, **Scott Williamson ('93)** had a clear-cut grasp on his future.

"My first solo as a boy soprano in my church's childrens' choir started my lifelong love affair with singing," he says.

From that point on, all of the singing, musical arranging and conducting Williamson participated in have led to some major high notes in his career. On June 24, 2008, Williamson was named music director of the Norfolk-based Virginia Chorale – Virginia's only fully professional choral ensemble. His title was changed from music director to artistic director in the middle of last season following staff cutbacks.

A member of Madison Singers from 1990 to 1993, Williamson started conducting professionally while he was an undergraduate at JMU. After finishing studies at JMU and Westminster Choir College, he earned a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Maryland. Williamson then spent time in New York City performing regularly as a tenor in New York's premier choruses.

While in New York, he heard about the Virginia Chorale leadership position from a colleague, and he inquired about and applied for the job. Williamson thought he was a long shot. "I was elated to be a finalist and even more thrilled to get the job," he says.

Williamson has proved his leadership on Virginia's musical scene. In June of this year, he accepted a second job as artistic director of Opera Roanoke. A familiar face to Southwest Virginia audiences, Williamson has appeared in more than a dozen Opera Roanoke productions as a tenor. Opera Roanoke Board

of Trustees President Roger Dalton told the *The Roanoke Times*, "Scott was the ideal choice to maintain artistic continuity and provide dynamic leadership."

Rehearsing music and programming concerts are Williamson's favorite job duties. "As a conductor, the rehearsal process can be the most meaningful, as it mirrors life's trial and error processes, experimentation, discovery and growth," he explains. "Sharing the best *a cappella* choral music and Virginia's finest singers with our appreciative audiences is especially meaningful."

The behind-the-scenes administration of a major chorale or opera company is something "no college course can prepare one for," says Williamson. The Virginia Chorale is a small, independent nonprofit organization that depends entirely upon the contributions of individual supporters. "It is hard to run the program in an environment where corporate and government support is dwindling," he adds.

Undaunted by challenges, Williamson is a passionate advocate for the importance of the arts. "Art is vital in our communal lives, and I enjoy the challenges of enlisting support for what we do."

Williamson, who chose to attend JMU because of the reputation and quality of the School of Music, is proud that he followed his passion and can't imagine what his life would be like if he hadn't. "My other option was a pre-law track at the University of Virginia via a Navy ROTC scholarship," he says.

Quite a different tune; thank goodness for children's choirs and 8-year-olds' dreams. ❧

**Music major Scott Williamson ('93) serves as artistic director of both the Virginia Chorale and Opera Roanoke.**