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NEWS

Women's chorus celebrates 30 years of community in the Triangle



Chapel Hill Women's Chorus performs their spring concert at First Presbyterian Church in Durham, NC on April 30, 2023. Photo contributed by Laura Justus Sam.

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Since 1993, the Women's Voices Chorus has provided a welcoming space for soprano-alto female singers and has promoted musical works written by and for women.

This Saturday, the WVC will host a performance titled "Together We Sing," which will serve as a celebration of the chorus's 30th anniversary in the Triangle.

The chorus currently has around 60 members, but began with less than 30 when Mary Lycan founded it.

In 1991, Lycan joined a local women's chorus in Palo Alto, Ca., and noticed that all the songs they sang were composed by men. "I'm not sure whether that was always true for that chorus, but it was true that year and I thought, 'What is wrong here? Whose voice are we singing here?'" she said.

Lycan said she then began searching for compositions written for women's voices in the Stanford Music Library. "I was able to take them home and try them out at the piano and I thought I'd lost my mind because I thought, 'These are wonderful. Why don't we know these pieces?'" she said.

After collecting nearly 800 musical works by women, Lycan focused on putting together an ensemble to sing them. With the help of the director of the Compass Center in Chapel Hill, she was able to secure funds for publicity and begin rehearsals. Among the first members of the WVC was Jacqueline Little, who said she found out about the organization through an advertisement.

Little said she enjoyed learning about the history behind the compositions and that the chorus members seemed ready to work together and discover these pieces.

"I think that, because everybody in there was interested in music and making music, that was an automatic bond from the very beginning," she said.

Janet Huebner, the current president of WVC, joined the group in 1996 after attending one of their concerts and said that the community that came with an all-female chorus went beyond just singing.

"When someone's sick, we check in with each other," she said. "If someone needs shopping done, we do that for each other. It's just a really supportive community, and I really enjoy being a part of that."

Although Lycan stepped away from the chorus in 2006, the artistic directors that followed her have continued to keep the spirit of WVC alive.

Allan Friedman, who served as the artistic director until 2019, wrote numerous pieces for the chorus and said he was inspired by how the singers supported each other.

During his time with the chorus, he also facilitated summer benefit concerts where donations were collected for charities such as Arts for Life and the Compass Center for Women and Families.

Friedman said he had been interested in putting on concerts for local nonprofits for a long time and felt that they helped WVC become more integrated with the local community.

"I believe in the power of music to do good in this world," he said. "I wouldn't be a musician if I didn't feel that way."

Laura Sam, WVC's current artistic director, said she spent most of her career working with students, and that working with an adult group has allowed her to appreciate new perspectives from women of diverse backgrounds.

Throughout the last thirty years, Huebner said she has enjoyed seeing women of various ages join the chorus, spanning from women in their 20s to those in their 80s.

"It really represents a community organization, and I love that it's so vibrant, and we're still attracting young, talented women to sing with us," she said. "I think that's been the most fun to watch as the course has evolved."

Huebner said the chorus has been planning for their "Together We Sing" performance for the last few years and that she is looking forward to it, especially since she was involved since WVC's early years.

The anniversary performance will include a blend of past chorus favorites and new material that embodies the chorus' mission, Sam said. This includes musical works such as "Ave Maria, Opus 12" by Johannes Brahms, which was the very first piece that the chorus performed.

"I think we were just weaving together quite an array of pieces that will hopefully bring joy, give people reason to think deeply and also to laugh," Sam said.

In the future, Little said she hopes the chorus can continue to exist and allow people to sing.

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