

Arlington's Master Chorale celebrates 40 years of the joy of singing

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By Shirley Jinkins

A diverse crowd of college students, professionals and retired couples rushed into the Trinity United Methodist Church sanctuary, music scores in hand.

One young woman hurried in wearing the red heels and employee ID from her workday.

As the director raised his hands, the cacophony of conversation hushed, replaced in an instant with a capella music that rose like the swell of an incoming tide.

The members of the 100-voice Arlington Master Chorale have maintained an unflappable bravura this spring during rehearsals for three upcoming programs and, on short notice, the funeral of Van Cliburn. Their 40th anniversary season will be celebrated tonight and Friday with a concert at Trinity United Methodist Church. It will be the first time the group has performed at Trinity.

"What I really like about working with the Master Chorale is they are just a whole lot of people who enjoy singing," said Randy Jordan, who has directed the Chorale for nine years. "They've had experience in college, high school or church choirs that they want to carry to the next level."

Only about 20 percent of the members are music professionals, Jordan said. The rest are laymen and include doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers and veterinarians.

Members are selected after auditioning for the non-profit volunteer chorus. Their voices are judged on quality and range, and all members must be able to read music.

"They're not pretentious. They are willing and eager to learn and sing good quality music to the best of their ability," Jordan said. "I find that challenging, enjoyable and intellectual."

The Arlington Master Chorale began as the Arlington Civic Chorus in 1973. It was later renamed the Arlington Choral Society and became the Arlington Master Chorale in 2005.

During its 2007 season, the Chorale reached a new level in its classical repertoire when it performed Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra and sang at Carnegie Hall for the first time.

The Master Chorale toured Italy last summer and sang at St. Peter's Basilica and other cathedrals in Rome and Florence, Jordan said.

"Ours is a civic chorus, but it's a civic chorus on a higher level," said Jordan. "The rehearsals are very intensive. It's good choral literature and very accessible and pleasing to the average audience."

Jordan is well-known in choral circles and is currently an adjunct professor at the University of Texas at Arlington. He directed Arlington's Martin High School choirs for 23 years from 1982 to 2005 and served as the fine arts chair. He also directed Azle High School's choral program from 1975 to 1982.

He has been the choral director at several churches in Arlington and Azle.

Although the Thursday and Friday performances will be the season finale concerts, the Chorale will perform Carmina Burana with the Fort Worth Symphony at Bass Performance Hall in May. And their annual Spring

Fling is scheduled May 10 at Arlington Music Hall. The Spring Fling is a free concert held to introduce the group to people who may have not heard them perform.

Singing for Cliburn

The group's size and versatility were factors in a recent invitation to sing at Van Cliburn's funeral on March 3 alongside Schola Cantorum, Arborlawn United Methodist Church and Broadway Baptist Church choirs. About 300 singers performed during the funeral.

"It was an amazing experience," said Jordan.

Vocalists had one day, about two hours, to rehearse together before the service.

Several of Cliburn's favorite hymns were on the program. But Jordan said it was Moscow Nights and A Russian Folk Song, both sung in Russian, that were the most challenging for the combined choirs.

"That was the hardest part, trying to get the Russian to flow out of our mouths," Jordan said. "With 300 singers, someone's bound to get the vowels out correctly."

The vocalists say friends and family members are still asking about the experience.

"It was probably one of the most important things I'll ever do in my life," said Amy Keller, a second-generation Master Chorale member who sang at the funeral. "It was so moving. We felt like he was looking down from heaven."

Keller, 46, sang with her parents, Ben Keller and JoAnn Keller Brown in the Chorale until she was 18, then left for a few years to marry and have children. She rejoined in 2007.

"The pull for me is not just the family legacy," said Keller, who is a teacher at L.D. Bell High school in Hurst. Rehearsals "can make for a really long day," she said, "but I find myself leaving rehearsals more energized than when I went in."

The red shoes at the rehearsal on Monday belonged to Christina Brock, 25, who had rushed from her job as an engineer at XTO Energy in downtown Fort Worth to make it to the rehearsal on time.

A soprano, Brock recently moved to the area from Houston, where she sang with the Houston Choral Society.

"I found this group as soon as I could," she said. "I love it."

A couple from Arlington has been with the Chorale from its beginning.

"We've sung every year," said Wes Hopp, who met his wife, Lynda in the Chorale. "We're charter members."

He sings baritone, she's an alto.

"He was a music teacher, I worked for the school district," said Lynda Hopp. "We married in 1975, and the chorus sang at our wedding."

That was four children and six grandchildren ago.

The Hopps say they'll keep singing until their voices go.

"It is an opportunity to do really good high caliber music, and to sing with an orchestra," Lynda Hopp said. "Both of us love music, and it speaks to our souls."

Keller said she also enjoys the challenge of the music, a sense of community with Arlington, and the camaraderie of people she has known for years.

"Every time we sing, I hope that someone is touched by what they feel and what they hear," said Keller.