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Singing That Nourishes Body and Soul

By Terri Dunbar-Curran , Published: August 5, 2010

Singing is an integral part of our psyche and it's not uncommon to find small choirs scattered throughout communities. This phenomenon is one which prompted Neeta Helms, President of Classical Movements, to arrange a choral festival to celebrate that talent.

Concert tour specialists, Classical Movements have been arranging international events for almost two decades. They have staged festivals in over 135 countries and worked with some of the world's most famous philharmonic orchestras, choirs and youth orchestras.

Born from the impression local choirs have made on Helms, the second Ihlombe South African Choral Festival will be held at the University of the Western Cape, Langa Community Centre and St. George's Cathedral from tomorrow to Sunday. "I discovered that the common person on the street here is quite likely to sing," says Helms. "Like people would describe the Irish or Welsh as singing nations, it is the same here. It really impressed me."

Helms has been doing business with South Africa since 1994, although it was not always music related. In that time she became aware of what was happening in music circles. "Over the last few years what has changed is that from a few choirs there seem to be an abundance. We started this festival most of all because the music here is very compelling. People around the world should know about it."

She says that is one of the main aims of Ihlombe, to raise awareness of the extent and quality of choral music in the country. She once took a group of singers to a game lodge and they decided to sing for the staff. "And the staff sang back to them. It was really quite spectacular." That experience and many others like it strengthened her resolve to begin Ihlombe.

When the festival was launched last year there were 14 choirs involved. That number has shot up to 36 for this year's event. "We have the best of the best participating this year. The Drakensberg Boys' Choir; George Gobingca Mxadana's Imilonji KaNtu Choral Society and Richard Cock's Chanticleer Singers performed in the Gauteng leg of the festival last week. My great joy in this whole process is the many landmark names that are involved," adds Helms.

Leon Starker's Pro Cantu Youth Choir, which Helms affirms is highly regarded around the world, will perform at the Langa Community Centre tomorrow along with the Singers Marin – Les Etoiles from San Francisco. The Herschel Chorale and the Cape Town Male Voice Choir; both under the leadership of Margaret Barlow, will also be involved this year.

Last year Fezeka High School, the winners of the High School Choral Eisteddfod, performed. But because they won for the second year in a row, it was decided that the runners-up, the Manyano High School Choir from Khayelitsha, should take part instead. “We also have one of the finest children’s choirs in the US, the Children’s Chorus of Washington, participating. They will do an American programme, with jazz, spirituals, country and folk. Then from French-speaking Canada there is Gregory Charles’ College Vocal de Laval. Their programme, I promise is going to be fantastic. It will include a lot of modern stuff. Rudolph de Beer’s Mecer City of Tygerberg Choir is another outstanding group.”

The South Cape Children’s Chori from George boasts the youngest singers at the festival with children from the age of nine performing. Also displaying their skills will be Lizl Gaffley’s Kensington Chorale.

One of the aims of the festival is to see choirs performing out of their usual areas, and that goes beyond merely just hosting international groups. Even local choirs will have the opportunity to branch out into new communities.

Each concert will consist of four or five choirs who have not been given guidelines as to what they should include in their programmes, allowing for a range of songs and styles. “I can’t imagine that anyone will not have the most amazing time,” says Helms. “Each concert will be two hours of very different and exciting music.”

By the time the idea for the festival was born, Helms had already worked with several South African conductors. “I decided to talk to them and other key people to find out what they wanted from the festival. One of the things I heard from everybody was that there was a great thirst for education and exchanges – giving and receiving.”

UWC is collaborating with Classical Movements on the exchanges, as well as a series of panel discussions and master classes. “The workshops are open to anyone and for that reason the prices are very low. We have people from around the world and locally leading them.”

Panel discussions will include whether competitions build a choir’s reputation or limit them, the role of a choral board member, and whether vibrato has a place in choral singing. The aim is to hold the festival yearly and Helms envisions it going from strength to strength. She has already had queries from choirs in New Zealand, Israel and across Europe for next year. She also hopes to make it possible for more choirs from across Africa to participate.

This year will benefit The All Saints Blind Choir which is under the leadership of Dr. Norbett Ntuli in GaRankuwa, north of Pretoria.