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Springfield Choral Society sings for peace

Weekend concert also honors service members

BY AMANDA ROBERT



Marion van der Loo was already thinking about Christmas back in June.

As the music director of the Springfield Choral Society listened to "Jul, Jul, Strlande Jul," a song from Sweden that means "Christmas, Christmas, Beautiful Christmas," she became mesmerized by its meaning.

"The text says point-blank, 'Christmas take away from the blood and the war,'" van der Loo says. "It's the essence of what I feel personally. I want everyone to come home safe to their respective homes — Germany, Korea, France, Italy, United States, Pakistan, anywhere. I want people to be safe and free of the fear and the alarm of war."

Van der Loo, who's starting her fifth season as head of the 40-year-old choral society, started looking for music about peace from other countries. She had previously conducted her chorus through languages like Russian, French and German, but van der Loo didn't want to stop there. This time, in addition to Swedish,

she challenged them to learn Latvian and Chinese.

This weekend, van der Loo and the Springfield Choral Society will present "Peace in All the Earth," a concert of 22 songs from 12 different countries, in eight different languages. The chorus will dedicate its program to men and women serving in the military.

Van der Loo hopes that at least 700 people will attend the choral society's performances on Saturday and Sunday and leave with thoughts of hope and peace.

"No one's going to understand all of the words we sing at this concert," she says. "But they're going to understand the combination of voices and lives and intentions."



When van der Loo first came to the Springfield Choral Society, there were only 20 singers. Now there are nearly 70.

The organization's growth could be attributed to van der Loo's experience. She started her career on the east coast as a professional singer and later transitioned to conducting professional choruses and orchestras. In addition to her latest role in the Springfield music scene, she also teaches voice at Millikin University in Decatur.

But when asked why singers keep coming back, van der Loo laughs and says: "It's charisma. Pure charisma."

The Springfield Choral Society features a mix of amateur and semi-professional singers, as well as chorus newcomers and veterans of 20 years and more. Van der Loo lists voice professors, a dentist, a psychologist, a few nurses, teachers, homemakers and even the executive vice president of a local bank on her roster.

"People love to sing, and I'm glad they like to sing with me," she says. "They love enriching the community with something they can do other than just what they do in their, quote, real lives."

Mark Robinson, an elementary school administrator from Bloomington, joined the Springfield Choral Society this year. He doesn't mind driving down to Springfield for weekly rehearsals, he says, because the chorus offers him opportunities that he doesn't have at home. There isn't an official city choral society in Bloomington, he continues, and while he's involved with music at his church, it's mostly contemporary.



"This is a real stretch for me and that's why I want to be a part of it," Robinson says. "The music is very different from anything I've done vocally, and I just appreciate the challenge of it."

Jan Kirkham has been with the Springfield Choral Society since 1985. At that time, she says, she was a vocal music professor at Illinois College. She now works in a totally different field at the University of Illinois Springfield.

"I continue to sing year after year, because now it's an avocation," Kirkham says. "It's a perfect way for me to express my musicianship."

The Springfield Choral Society meets every Monday to rehearse at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul at Second and Lawrence. To prepare for "Peace in All the Earth," they've had several extra rehearsals including a recent three-day-long weekend session. Van der Loo works the singers hard, she says, and holds them to the same standard that's set for professional choruses.

For each concert, van der Loo prepares a study CD for each singer with her enunciation of the songs in different languages. For more difficult songs, she makes separate tracks for each voice part in rhythm. Singers can then listen to the CD in their car or at home, she says, and become familiar with the words and sound.

Deborah Berman, who's been with the chorus since around 1980, enjoys rehearsing just as much as performing, she says, partly for the challenge that singing in different languages brings. This concert is special, she says, because the chorus is embracing even more cultures and passing them along to the audience.

"It is a way we have of expressing everyone's desire that there be peace," Berman says. "It's a lot of languages this time, but it's a challenge for us and makes us feel like we're reaching out to all of the world."

Cynthia Oeck-Solomon, a voice professor at Millikin University who's been with the chorus for a year, adds that the theme of the concert also complements the upcoming holiday season.

"We're talking about a beautiful time when everyone gets together," she says. "There's unity in the thoughts that we have, and we want to bring that out to everyone in the community and to the servicemen here and abroad."



As plans for "Peace in All the Earth" were set in motion, the Springfield Choral Society decided to incorporate a special dedication to men and women serving in the military.

At each performance, audience members will be given cards and asked to write short messages to troops serving overseas. These cards, along with CDs, programs and pictures from the concert, will be collected by Operation Support Our Troops-Illinois, an organization based in Naperville that sends care packages to deployed service members in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Deb Rickert, the president of Operation Support Our Troops-Illinois, says the organization annually sends 125,000 pounds of care packages, which include everything from beef jerky to shaving cream to thank-you cards. She constantly hears that troops appreciate the cards the most.

"To get a note that says, 'During this holiday season, you are in my thoughts and prayers and I appreciate the sacrifice that you're making,' gives them that little extra," Rickert says. "[They] can get through whatever this day brings because fellow citizens across the world are thinking about them. It has a huge impact."

The Springfield Choral Society is also encouraging people to buy tickets for veterans or to bring family and friends who are veterans to the program.

"A woman in the chorus wrote to me that her brother died in Vietnam 40 years ago on one of the days of the concert," van der Loo says. "She was so moved that we are doing this. That pretty much says it all.

"It's going to speak to people from many different perspectives."

The Springfield Choral Society presents "Peace in All the Earth" at 7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 5, at Central Baptist Church, 501 S. Fourth St. in Springfield, and at 4 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 6, at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, 700 E. Spruce St. in Chatham. Tickets are \$10 at the door.

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