

ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS



LINDA ANN CHOMIN

Oratorio society to sing music for the masses

The sanctuary at First United Methodist Church in Plymouth is hushed as Leonard Ricinto lifts his arms to begin the next-to-the-last rehearsal for the Plymouth Oratorio Society's spring concert Saturday, May 6.

United in song, the choir of nearly 65 voices sends a chill through an audience of one — me.

What a privilege to hear and watch the choir in action as Ricinto leads them through John Rutter's *Magnificat* with soprano Rose Keehr singing the solos. Now in its 14th season, the Plymouth Oratorio Society has built a reputation for singing masterworks. In addition to *Magnificat*, the choir will perform Handel's *Coronation Anthem No. 1* and 4. The Michigan Sinfonietta Orchestra joins them for the concert.

Joyous experience

"We want the audience to have a joyous experience with the music, to enjoy the poetry set to music," said Ricinto, now in his fifth season as



director. "I try to have a balance of styles so there's something new and refreshing and to present the best choral literature so that we're stretching ourselves."

G.F. Handel's, *Ladok the Priest and Let Thy Hand Be Strengthened*, the first and fourth coronation anthems, were first performed in 1727 at a ceremony to crown King George II in Westminster Abbey. The choir will perform the fourth anthem with the Plymouth Symphony Orchestra Sunday, May 21 at St. John Neumann Church in Canton.

"The Handel is from the Baroque period, very well known and energetic," said Ricinto. "*Magnificat* is by a living English composer. Rutter is very popular because he's so accessible. It's a very hard work and performed part in English, part in Latin but the audience will be able to understand it all because they'll be able to read along."

Accessibility

Keehr thinks Rutter's accessibility can be deceiving. She speaks from experience as the soprano reaching for the highest notes in the work.

"Rutter is deceptive for some people. Because he's so beautiful, people think it's easy," said Keehr, who's studied voice with Glenda Kirkland and Donald Hartmann at Eastern Michigan University. "But there are a lot of high notes with a quiet interlude at the end."

Choir member Donald Pratt agrees with Ricinto about the accessibility of Rutter's work though.

"The *Magnificat* is exactly like it's titled," said Pratt of Canton. "It's a beautiful piece, very approachable music. We'd done Rutter's *Requiem* and *Gloria*. You can really spot the same styles at times in both of those works. The Handel is fun to do and quite grand. I'm looking forward to doing the fourth anthem with the Plymouth Symphony Orchestra May 21. We've had a busy year. We performed a concert last month with the Eastern Michigan University Choir - *Te Deum* by Bruckner. Usually we perform only

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What: The Plymouth Oratorio Society performs the music of Handel and Rutter. A free-will offering will be taken (\$5 suggested donation). For information, call (734) 455-8353.
When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, May 6
Where: First United Methodist Church, 45201 N. Territorial Road, Plymouth



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BERNIER



FESTIVAL SPOTLIGHTS

VERY SPECIAL PERFORMERS

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN

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There was no doubt — Abbey Kratchke was there to have fun. The Farmington Hills singer had arrived early for a rehearsal with Fine Chimes, a musical group of young adults with a variety of special needs including developmental, physical and mental impairments.

The 15-member group, under director Patrice Morris-Weaver of Bloomfield Village, was preparing for a performance at the VSA Arts Festival Friday-Saturday, May 5-6 at Wonderland Mall in Livonia. Sponsored by the Southeast Region Committee of VSA Arts of Michigan, the festival features more than 160 performers from Birmingham, Pontiac, Farmington Hills, and Detroit. Founded by Jean Kennedy Smith in conjunction with the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 1974, VSA Arts (formerly known as Very Special Arts) provides programs in dance, music, drama, and the visual arts for persons with disabilities.

"I'm excited because my mom is going to be there," said Kratchke before the rehearsal at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church in Farmington Hills, "and because it's fun and I know everybody."

Having fun

According to Morris-Weaver, building socialization skills and having fun is what Fine Chimes is all about. Members increase attention spans and develop social skills such as working together as a team.

"We use the group for socialization," said Morris-Weaver, a registered music therapist with a master's degree in early childhood development.

"Everyone has needs and abilities. We're thankful for the opportunity to perform in a non-threatening atmosphere like a mall. And it can heighten the awareness of persons with special needs."

This is Fine Chimes' second concert this year. They performed at the

VSA Arts Festival

What: The celebration of arts ability features more than 150 performers, an art exhibit, and hands-on activities in art, music and movement. Call FAR Conservatory (248) 846-3347 for more information.

When: 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday, May 5, and noon to 3 p.m. Saturday, May 6.

Where: Wonderland Mall, Plymouth Road and Middlebelt, Livonia.

Michigan Performing Arts Talent Show at The Community House in Bristow during the weekend in April. At 1:30 p.m. Saturday, May 6, they'll play *Simple Gifts*, a Quaker hymn that tells us to be pure in heart and true to oneself, and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherazade*.

"We use chimes as opposed to bells because they're easier," said Morris-Weaver. "Each student plays one note that corresponds to the chime. Some of the members lack fine motor skills. The chimes help develop range of motion. It also helps to increase eye-hand coordination, and the strength of their grasp. And they're recognizing notes and letters."

Morris-Weaver, who works as a consultant in an early childhood program for Birmingham Public Schools, founded her first chime group 13 years ago at the Farmington Training Center which has since closed. Many of the original members, who joined Fine Chimes at its inception seven years ago, remain with the group. They live in Farmington, Birmingham, West Bloomfield, Novi, Walled Lake, Warren and Franklin, and range in age from 20 to 30.

"I learn from students," said Morris-Weaver. "They give me everything I need to help them and we all grow."

Dance and song

In addition to Fine Chimes' performance, individuals members of the group will strut their stuff. Kevin Brown will dance a solo to Backstreet Boys' *The Perfect Fan*, and Amy

Somerville will play a jazz medley arranged by Bess Bonnier. Somerville, a Walled Lake resident, studied with Bonnier after receiving a grant from the Southeast Region Committee of VSA Arts of Michigan.

Fine Chimes member Karen MacDonald lives to sing for an audience. The Franklin resident will perform an Italian art song by Scarlatti (*Gia il Sole dal Gange*) and the theme song from *Titanic* (*My Heart Will Go On*). She's been singing 14 years and is proud of the eight trophies sitting on the bookshelves in her bedroom. She was all of them for singing. She's achieved as a singer. She sang the national anthem before a Red Wings game and after was presented with a puck as a souvenir.

"At first I got nervous, but I've been performing for so long," said MacDonald. "It was fun."

Win-win

Performers like MacDonald and the rest of the Fine Chimes make all of the hours that Connie Lott spends coordinating festival musicians and dancers worth it. Lott, a member of the Southeast Region Committee and executive director of FAR Conservatory in Birmingham, doesn't mind seeing to all the details like making sure there are enough buses with wheelchair lifts for performers.

Once a year, the committee hosts the festival to spotlight the achievements of students in VSA Arts programs including those awarded mini-grants by the Southeast Region. Their annual scholarship, named after Livonia artist Jack Olds, provides money for an individual to pursue studies in the arts.

"I help to put it on for the special artists," said Lott. "They need the opportunity to shine. It's a win-win situation because the more positive feedback they get from the audience, their families and teachers, then the better they're going to do in their life. As a parent of a young woman with special needs, I've seen the self-confi-



Light and lyrical: *The Fine Chimes* (top left) have fun while practicing for an upcoming performance at Wonderland Mall. Karen MacDonald (directly above) sings a song from the hit film *Titanic*. Patrice Morris-Weaver (top photo) leads the Fine Chimes as they prepare for the VSA Arts Festival.

dence, poise and social skills gained from taking music and dance. They helped my daughter at work and with social situations."

Benjamin Lemke is delighted to be hosting the festival at Wonderland Mall. He's looking forward to not only seeing performers such as the FAR Conservatory Dancers and choir from Pontiac Public Schools but viewing artworks created by children and adults in VSA programs throughout the state. There will also be hands-on art activities for children.

"The festival perfectly fits into our goal to be an active part of the community," said Lemke, general manager of Wonderland Mall. "The Very Special Arts philosophy goes with what we believe — to include all groups of a community. It opens the eyes about the talents we have in different areas."

Incorporating arts and culture into activities at the mall is something Lemke has tried to do since assuming his position at Wonderland in December 1998. Under his leadership, the mall has hosted a fund-raiser for the Livonia Symphony Orchestra as well as performances by Livonia high school bands.

"It is something we successfully did in Germany," said Lemke, who moved to the United States from his homeland of Germany in 1998. "It recreates the past for the future. It's what made people happy when they still had their downtowns with art fairs, art markets and activities. We focus on a family-friendly environment. It's not a contradiction to be successful in business and care for people."

Chorus concert is 'Your Ticket to Broadway'



STAFF PHOTO BY SEAN LEAHY

Ticket to Broadway: Thomas Sheets rehearses with the Oakland Community College Masterworks Choral.

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN

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Thomas Sheets has a vision for the chorus at Oakland Community College in Farmington Hills. He plans to at least triple the size of the 30-member group he calls the Oakland Community College Masterworks Choral.

Of course, it won't be in time for its performance of Broadway favorites Friday, May 5, at First Presbyterian Church of Farmington Hills.

Guest soloists Valerie Yova and David Troiano, along with chorale members, are *Your Ticket to Broadway* in this concert featuring music from *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Annie*, *Camelot*, and more. Yova and chorus member Fredrick Brohn will sing a duet from *Fiddler*.

"I just love large choruses," said Sheets, who also directs the University

What: The Oakland Community College Masterworks Choral give their spring concert, *Your Ticket to Broadway*.

When: 8 p.m. Friday, May 5

Where: First Presbyterian Church of Farmington Hills, 26165 Farmington Road at Eleven Mile Road.

Tickets: Suggested donation is \$5, \$12 for a family of 3 or more. Call (248) 522-3590

Musical Society Choral Union in Ann Arbor. "Chorally speaking, bigger is better. I would just love to develop a 100-plus voice group."

Since taking over as director in January of 1999, Sheets has striven to expand the vocal talents of students in the sole choral program in the college's five-campus system. The chorus, which ranges in age from 18 to 60, draws students from several cities including Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills, Livonia,

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