

'Songs of Zion' offers message of hope, unity

BY CHRIS SAUNDERS : The Herald-Sun
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CHAPEL HILL -- Confronting dissidence in the Middle East seems to be a requirement now in the job description for one trying to secure the big chair in the Oval Office.

President Obama now faces the same challenge as previous U.S. presidents, with Israeli troops having mobilized on the Gaza border in late December just before he took office. He has made a commitment to diplomacy in the Middle East, sending envoy George Mitchell to the region last week.

An all-female community chorus will transcend conflict and politics tonight in Durham with a performance offering a unifying message of human experience.

"It's necessary to go beneath the current political situation and reach that common humanity through art," said Lisa Braden of Chapel Hill, a member of the Women's Voices Chorus, a Triangle-based musical group that has been performing in the area for 16 years.

The chorus will perform its winter concert, at 7:30 tonight in Duke Chapel on Duke University's West Campus.

The program, "Shirei Zion -- Songs of Zion," will celebrate music inspired by Jewish traditions, including works by Jewish composers and an array of Yiddish and Hebrew folksongs.

Allan Friedman of Carrboro, the conductor for the chorus, said he chose the program's theme 11 months ago. He was initially worried about how the music would be received after the violence broke out in the Middle East after Christmas.

"As I thought about it more, I thought there are signs of hope we could offer in this music," Friedman said.

The chorus will not use the performance for any political message. A member handling publicity for the performance, Janet Buehler of Hillsborough, said that the program is not meant to imply that Judaism is right and the Palestinians are wrong. Instead, she said, the performance serves as a reminder of the beauty belonging to a region ravaged by conflict.

"We are focused on the universal message," Buehler said. "I think art is drawing on the universal human experience. I think something like this can address those deeper needs."

Braden, who moved to Chapel Hill from California last July and joined the chorus in September, agreed with her



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The Women's Voices Chorus rehearses Thursday at Duke Chapel. The group will perform tonight.

fellow performer.

"Art is the hearts and minds of the culture," she said. It's about a more enduring and eternal spirit that is more universal."

The chorus will spotlight that universal experience by ending with the singing of Psalm 133, a verse that emphasizes the virtues of unity, in Hebrew, Latin and Arabic.

"The hope is all these languages become one," Friedman said.

Founded in 1993 by Chapel Hill resident Mary Lycan, the chorus has served to give Triangle women a voice in performing. About 60 women perform an eclectic array of music in programs, held every winter and spring, based on different themes. For instance, its spring concert held in May will center around the theme of dancing and will feature songs from South Africa, Brazil, Russia and many other countries.

For Deborah Coclansis of Chapel Hill, the group's accompanist and 14-year veteran, the rewards of the chorus have come in the form of feeling part of a community.

"First of all, it's about being part of this group," said Coclansis, who will only be singing and not playing piano tonight. "These women are my people.

"Once we get something going, it is something that we want to share with people. Our joy in it is that music is such a unifying experience."

This sense of community is not lost on Braden, either.

"The whole point of making music is, by definition, a communal experience," Braden said. "You're creating something that's meant to be shared."

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