

Choral concert to meld voice, dance talents

By Rebecca Bailey : The Herald-Sun

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CHAPEL HILL -- Because the spring concert's theme is "music about dancing," director Allan Friedman and the Women's Voices Chorus will unite their talents with local professional dancers from a variety of traditions, including swing, ballroom, Irish, Appalachian and classical Indian dance. Saturday's "Cheek to Cheek" features music in 11 languages, from Cole Porter to Brahms to international folk dance tunes.

Joining chorus member and pianist Deborah Coclanis will be percussionist John Hanks and bass player Robbie Link. 'Cause you know "it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

Friedman, who doubles as assistant conductor of Duke Chapel Music, said he has wanted to program this music for some time.

"As I thought about it more and more, I realized that this concert was a great opportunity to interact with other local artists," he said. Artists in different disciplines often segregate themselves, "forgetting that the pursuit of beauty, personal enlightenment and making a public statement" are universal artistic goals.

Choral music combined with dance isn't unheard of, he noted.

" 'Carmina Burana,' 'Les Noces,' even 'Messiah' is sometimes performed with ballet dancers, but it's not a common occurrence," Friedman said. He described the unique challenges in the choral-dance collaboration, emphasizing that singers and dancers would need to stay "somewhat flexible" with tempo choices.

At a recent rehearsal, Friedman had chorus members -- ranging from high school student Ashley Oskardmay to octogenarian Betty Bergstrand -- laughing together even as they worked to meet his exacting standards.

"This is hard," he repeated as he led the singers through one particularly tricky passage. At times he leapt and stomped out the beat, and at times he corrected himself: "Measure 90 please -- let your conductor have another chance at that."

The Chorus' commitment to the gifted Friedman is impressive: three weeks ago, Janet Buehler took a few hours out to give birth to her third son; she missed one rehearsal and then was back in place, infant in arms, her music propped on a stand. But she was only following the example of another chorister who gave birth this past New Year's Day and then sang in the late-January winter concert.

Dancers include Apple Chill Cloggers Elia Bizzarri and Elizabeth Raines performing traditional Appalachian dance to the Chorus' rendition of "Shady Grove."

"We're going to do a freestyle partner dance," said Raines, who compared the form to old-fashioned barn dancing. "We're very twirly -- we like the complicated twirls and swings. And we do a lot of buck steps -- the flashier, more percussive and syncopated steps."

Cailyn Pozella, a junior at the Emerson Waldorf School, will perform Irish dance to Celtic "Mouth Music." The Chapel Hill native is a national competitor in Irish dance and has reached the "Preliminary Championship," or second-highest level in competition. For Saturday's concert, Pozella choreographed her own steps.

"I'll be jumping a lot, doing some of my championship moves," she said, adding that she would wear her show costume and her soft, rather than her hard-soled shoes.

To the Chorus' "Dravidian Dithyramb," Classical Indian dancer Priya Gopal will perform the Bharata-natyam dance, "literally the dance of India, an ancient classical art form," she said. The form combines "music, rhythm, facial expressions and hand gestures to tell stories from the great epics of India, as well as to show beauty in movement." Her costume, she said, is traditional for this dance. And while she has never danced to choral music before, she said she was "very excited about this piece."

Oksana Klyuchnyk and her partner Yuriy Simakov, owners of the area's Fred Astaire Studio, are the only dancers with experience in performing to choral music: "Back home in Ukraine, we danced to voice very often," said Klyuchnyk.

The partners will dance two numbers, beginning with a fox trot to Irving Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek." Then they'll perform a faster combination of ballroom steps, including quick-step and swing steps, to Duke Ellington's "It Don't Mean a Thing (if it Ain't Got That Swing)."

And if listeners find it hard to keep still, they'll have their chance to move. For the final rousing "Siyahamba," a South African folk song, "we're hoping to get the audience up and dancing," said Friedman, who arranged the piece. The singers, too, get in on the action with choreographed movements and colorful scarves. It's the season to spring up and dance.

WHAT: Women's Voices Chorus Spring Concert "Cheek to Cheek" with dance performances.

WHEN: Saturday at 2 p.m.

WHERE: The Chapel Hill Bible Church, 260 Erwin Road.

TICKETS: \$15; \$5 students and children. At the door or through www.womensvoiceschorus.org.