



Concert's a celebration of animals, culture

By Rebecca Bailey : The Herald-Sun

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CHAPEL HILL -- Fireflies and crickets, turtles and owls and grasshoppers, to name only a few. This Saturday evening at UNC's Forest Theatre, the Women's Voices Chorus will celebrate creatures great and small in a summer concert.

"Just Us Chickens" is especially designed for children, with storytelling and a sing-along as well as choral music about animals. But adults will also enjoy the wide variety of music in several languages. All donations benefit Paws4Ever, a nonprofit animal welfare organization.

Artistic Director Allan Friedman has assembled Women's Voices' old favorites as well as new material, ranging from Louis Jordan's jazzy "Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens" to folk music from Africa, France, and Japan. He noted that music about animals particularly suits the tastes and attention spans of children, and it fits the outdoor setting.

Friedman even brought his mom down from Duluth, Minn., to share her talents as a storyteller. Alana Friedman, who worked in Early Childhood Family Education for many years, will tell the story of Chicken Little. And leading a secular sing-along is Zemer Lexie Hallman, cantor at Temple Beth Or in Raleigh.

While these elements are aimed at kids, adults should find the program richly rewarding.

"We always try to attain a good mix of music for different tastes," said Friedman, "and this concert should be interesting to people of all ages."

Chorus member Franzi Rokoske amplified that idea.

"There's a lot of richness in the music ... and as usual, we are singing music from several countries and in multiple styles," she said. "When I first heard we were singing an animal-themed concert, I groaned a little -- I mean, we are grown women, after all. But I figured Allan was going to choose songs that weren't childish, even if children could love them."

"I've really enjoyed singing this music," Rokoske said. "Some of the music is just happy and straight-up about animals, and then other songs are more nuanced." She noted that the title song, "Ain't Nobody Here but us Chickens," is "really funny" and combines Allan Friedman's narration with music. "I think it's going to come off very well."

Karla Byrnes picked "Chickens" as a particular favorite: "I sing Alto II, and we do the base line -- it's a lot of fun," she said.

Singers Janet Bueller and Carli Webb added that "Chickens" will include masks and minimal costuming.

"And really, with a mask on, how can you NOT ham it up a little?" Webb said.

Byrnes, Rokoske, Bueller and Webb all mentioned two African songs as stand-outs.

"Ananka Kuti [from Malawi] and Sansa Kroma [West African] are both beautiful, though very different in sound," said Rokoske. "The first is sort of a meditative, lulling song, while Sansa is a get-up-and-dance-with-us kind of song."

"The lesson of [Sansa Kroma]," explained Bueller, "is to reassure children that should they ever become orphaned, others in the village will take care of them." And Ananka Kuti, she said, "is a lament for the animals that are disappearing from the countryside -- storks, owls, woodpeckers."

Bueller also singled out Hotaru Koi, or "Ho, Firefly," a traditional Japanese children's song; and Byrnes noted that the Celtic "Mouth Music" is "beautiful, though difficult to sing."

"The Nurse's Song," from Three Songs of Innocence (based on William Blake's poetry), was singled out by each singer contacted.

"It's a wonderful song about the exuberance of children at play and the adult's attempt to temper that," said Rokoske. "As a mom of a 4-year-old, this song really resonates for me, especially in the summer."

Bueller also called this favorite "a hauntingly beautiful piece that reminds me of warm summer evenings when I was a child -- fireflies, the smell of cut grass -- and I didn't want to quit playing and come home to bed. Now that I am the parent on the other side of this experience, with children who also beg to play just a little longer, it's all the more nostalgic."

Webb added that "the joy in singing ["The Nurse's Song"] for me is making the vocal distinction between the darker, more mature sound of the older, tired nurse, and the brighter, more youthful tone of the enthusiastic children. And as a mom, those times when you give in and let your kids be kids -- for just a little bit longer -- are some of the sweetest."



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