

Caledon's Lydia Adams: Making connections, magic with music

By Constance Scrafield

Lydia Adams falls into that happy class of person whose work is her best passion, as conductor and artistic director of both the Elmer Iseler Singers and the Amadeus Choir.

"It was a long time coming," she said cheerfully in a recent interview. "My mother was a piano teacher where we lived in Glace Bay in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. There were two piano teachers in the town."

"It was a mining and fishing town," she added. "My mother had a choir in the church and people were determined to keep the choir going."

The community church in Grace Bay had been built by the mining community and had the most "wonderful acoustics."

"The church was as much an instrument as anything we would bring into it," Adams said.

She went on to talk about her mother and how influential she had been for so many people, not least of which Adams herself.

"My mom was the most influential person in my life and many others'," she recalled. "There was always music in our house."

"When I was 10, there were three pianos," Adams added. "We didn't have that big a house, but they were there and someone was always playing them. She would leave choral scores of Mozart and Bach on the pianos and I would play them and sing all the parts. My mom inspired in me such a deep love of choral music."

"At that time, there was no support for music and the arts in schools, but sometimes the principals would call her and she would go and teach; not to be paid, but just to encourage the children to love music."

When Adams, as a child, went for lessons, her mother sent her to the town's other piano teacher.

"Those lessons were just a joy," she said. "I had a lot of fun. My life was full of music."

After secondary school, she went to Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, where she soon realized how lucky she was.

"I called home and said, 'Mom, I'm getting credits for what I love to do!'"

Once she received her Music and Education degrees from Mount Allison, Adams went on to continue her studies in London, England, where she had the opportunity to study conducting under Sir David Willcocks, famous British choral conductor, at the Royal College of Music. At the same time, she worked and studied at the National Opera School, London, playing the piano and learning to be a répétiteur (a member of an opera company who accompanies rehearsals on the piano and coaches the singers).

In the late 1970s, she was invited to a camp run by the Nova Scotia Choral Federation to teach adults who came from all over the province or, indeed, anywhere, to sing and to learn the fine art of singing in a choir.

It was there that Adams met Elmer Iseler, who asked her to come and play for his recently formed choir, the Elmer Iseler Singers (EIS). She joined them in 1981 and like Iseler, became a resident of Caledon.

"It was an inspiration to work with Elmer," Adams reminisced. "It was a tremendous privilege. People really felt they had touched greatness when they met Elmer or worked with him. And they had."

She travelled extensively with the group. In the early years, they went to Korea for the cultural build up to the Olympics. They toured all over the U.S. and Canada and continue to do so, with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.

Iseler, who also conducted the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, died in 1998 and was buried in the cemetery in Caledon East. His widow, Jesse, continues to live in the village and is still manager of EIS, travelling with them as they tour.

On Iseler's death, Adams, who since 1984 had been conductor for the Amadeus Choir, took over as conductor and artistic director of EIS.

With the two choirs' busy line-up of performances, Adams remarked that the scheduling "is really something."

For our interview, she was speaking from Winnipeg, a part of the Midwestern Tour EIS was doing at the moment. They had just been to Thunder Bay, singing with the Symphony there, as well as doing another concert in Kenora. In Winnipeg, they were about to perform the first concert for the city's New Music Festival. Then on to Saskatoon and a venue just outside Edmonton.

In February, the EIS will join with the Nathaniel Dett Chorale to tour Southern Ontario with their Amazing Grace concert. The tour includes a visit to Guelph's River Run Theatre Feb. 23, at 8 p.m.

"It's celebrating Black History month," Adams explained. "The chorale is a Canadian/American Afro choir. We'll be singing wonderful spirituals and gospel music."

Back home in Toronto, they will be performing Bach's B Minor Mass with the Amadeus Choir at Metropolitan United Church March 23. The work, one of Bach's last, will be recorded by the CBC.

"I love doing Bach," Adams confirmed. "His choral music is the best, just tremendous concerts. It is wonderful to have the

opportunity to perform them.?

The Elmer Iseler Singers is a professional choir of 20 voices, some of whom also have outside careers. They include a lawyer, a doctor and an engineer who have to ?really arrange their lives in order to go on the tours,? as Adams put it. ?But they are incredibly dedicated.?

Two years ago, EIS commissioned a work to be written in Arabic, a piece with Islamic text.

?This was a really important piece for us,? Adams reflected. ?It was an experiment ? building bridges ? that's the whole purpose of music. We sing in so many languages but this was the first time we sang in Arabic. Music is meant to build connections.?

?When we sing Mozart's Requiem, we're connected to the many people who have sung it before and the people everywhere who sing it,? she added. ?It is a common thread with other people in other places and other times.?

Adams realizes the importance of bringing music to people, how much it matters to the individuals in the audiences.

?It's always in my mind,? she mused. ?People come up to us later with tears in their eyes, telling us how much our performance meant to them. When I'm in front of the choir, conducting, there's magic there and I always look for that magic.

?The magic in the music.?

For tickets to Amazing Grace, call the River Run box office at 519-763-3000 or 1-877-520-2408 or visit riverrun.ca