

Elmer Iseler Singers album nominated for a Juno award

By Constance Scrafield

The 20-voice Elmer Iseler Singers (EIS) professional choir has been nominated for a Juno Award this year.

Together with Tapestry Opera and the Gryphon Trio, conducted by Wayne Strongman, they performed The Black Star Requiem, by Canadian Composer Andrew Staniland. They are among five contenders for the Classical Album of the Year: Vocal or Choral Performance.

‘We are thrilled with the nomination,’ EIS Artistic Director and Conductor Lydia Adams declared. ‘It’s the first time for their own nomination.’

In the course of their many concerts over the last 38 years, the EIS have never backed off dealing with tough issues. Indeed, over the weekend, at St. Anne’s Anglican Church in Toronto, they sang an all-Armenian concert of sacred and secular music, with soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian.

Bayrakdarian came to Canada from Armenia when she was young. She graduated from the University of Toronto with a degree in biomedical, but her fabulous soprano voice has carried her from one success to the next. She has won four consecutive Junos for Best Classical Album.

‘We wanted to bring attention to the potential for good of these refugees,’ Caledon resident Adams said. ‘Here is a wonderful singer who came here from Armenia early in her life and look at the richness she has brought to Canada.’

The trick of this concert was to get it right.

‘The music is easy, but the text is difficult – we found it tricky,’ Adams said. ‘There is one vowel which we can’t say as we normally do – we are trying to get the words – so they sound correct.’

This is one of the regular five concerts the EIS offers its subscribers but, in addition, they do much more. Last year, they went to the East Coast in July; this year it is the west for their touring concerts. They also sing in venues all over Ontario.

There is much more to the EIS tours than just singing on a stage, for everywhere they go to sing, they also share the joy of music with the communities with workshops for community choirs and schools.

‘We are making music together with community music,’ Adams commented. ‘There is real elevation of joining all those people into one focus.’

Adams was invited by Elmer Iseler, who lived in the hills of Albion, to play for his choir in 1981. By the mid ‘90s, Iseler, the most decorated musician in Canada, was ill. The choir’s Board of Directors asked Adams to step in as Interim Conductor and when Dr. Iseler died in 1997, she was asked again to take over the job of Artistic Director and Conductor.

‘The 20th anniversary of his passing is coming and we are going to acknowledge it, to truly celebrate his contribution to Canadian music,’ she remarked. ‘Certainly, all the mid to older conductors are influenced by Elmer in a positive way and many younger ones know of him and respect him, even at a distance.’

Philosophically, she added, ‘Whatever you do, you’re making ripples in the water and you hope those ripples are positive.’

Her work with the EIS, the Amadeus Choir, as well as her other obligations, keep Adams busy, but she is proud of the support she gets from others.

‘It’s wonderful to have Jesse (Iseler, Elmer’s widow) as manager of the choir,’ Adams commented.

Mrs. Iseler still lives in the area. Dr. Iseler is buried in the cemetery in Caledon East.

Although the EIS has travelled extensively across North America, they have not toured abroad. Funding is the main barrier, for this is a professional choir whose members must be paid per diem, their fares and needs supplied. In fact, the Board of Directors, who are dedicated to making a European tour happen, have established a fund to support the endeavour.

April saw the EIS travelling out west for a six-town tour of concerts and workshops with, once again, community choirs and schools through their Outreach program. As was the East Coast tour, the tour to Western Canada is funded in part by the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.

Part of the mantra of the artistic direction of the EIS is to engage and encourage Canadian talent in composing and singing in a ‘workshop situation.’

The EIS commission and perform many new works by Canadian composers.

In spite of a busy schedule with the concerts and tours, the members of the EIS have outside lives which they sometimes need balancing to accommodate the demands of the choir. One lady is a aerospace engineer, specializing in micro satellites and has been involved in the mechanics behind more than one space adventure.

Another is a physician. Others have lives full-time in music as teachers, musical leaders – and one in a rock band.

'We are a professional company,' Adams said. 'We work closely together to make sure they do things outside the choir for the sake of the richness they provide.'

Later in the day, there was a call with Mrs. Iseler. She wanted to talk about the proposal for an Arts Centre for Caledon. There is currently a survey on the Town's website, inviting people to comment on the benefits of such a structure.

'There is a community centre, hockey facilities and other sports centres, everything ' with the arts coming last, and they are still not sure,' she said, noting the survey. 'Certainly, there should be an arts centre ' a performing arts centre with an art gallery and teaching space for the arts. It would be a remarkable addition to the town.'

There was a brief discussion about the enthusiastic community of arts across the Headwaters area, with so much to offer not only the residents but to attract visitors to the region.

Said Mrs. Iseler, 'We have sung in so many churches in the area. Caledon needs its own performing arts centre.'