

Elora Festival Singers open OCA's 39th season Saturday

By Constance Scrafield

The famed Elora Festival Singers (EFS) will launch the Orangeville Concert Association's 2014-15 season Saturday night at the Orangeville Town Hall Opera House.

The concert will include a stunning collection of choral music, from old classical favourites to works by modern Canadian and American composers.

“Choral music is having a resurgence,” opined EFS's Managing Artistic Director and Librarian Esther Farrell.

She added EFS has been nominated for both a Juno and a Grammy in recent years for their recordings, specifically their CD of Eric Whitacre's compositions.

In March, they will perform in Carnegie Hall in New York as one of three professional choirs. During that tour, they will, as well, be singing, as the sole group, on a classical radio station, WWFM, with a stream of 20 million listeners.

Led by Noel Edison, who in 1997 succeeded the late Elmer Iseler as director of the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, EFS also serves as that choir's professional core.

“We have been to Carnegie with the Mendelssohn Choir,” said Farrell, “but this is the first time that we're being showcased there.”

This will serve as their entrée into the U.S. music scene. After making several recordings with Naxos, they have been asked by the recording company to begin doing concerts in the U.S.

It is great news for EFS.

“We're all in our early 30s and all professionals,” Farrell said. “Many of us have solo careers as well. Our long-term goal is to present Canadian classical choral music – we are happy to do the smaller venues locally but, also internationally.”

“There have been inquiries about our music and where to obtain copies of our CDs ever since the Juno and Grammy nominations, from all over the world.”

The “resurgence” of choral music may also be partly attributed to Eric Whitacre's “virtual choirs,” by which he invites anyone to participate in an online choir.

“People of all ages, from their 90s to young people, record their parts and he assembles it and plays it for the world. So, thousands of people are joining in,” Farrell explained.

“More professional singers are joining choirs in North America,” she advised, “when they can't make a solo career. Of course, there are many professional choirs in Europe.”

EFS members often do workshops with local choirs, which she said is “a great experience for all of us.”

Their appearance in Orangeville this weekend is the first concert of their own season. They will be performing sacred music by Joseph Haydn, Rachmaninoff and J.S. Bach, T. Corlis and Whitacre. These will be followed by rousing folk songs from North America and Britain – everything you love in a concert of choral music.

We asked Farrell what it is that the choir sings that makes the hair stand up on the back her neck just thinking about it – what is the biggest thrill to sing.

“I like our singing a cappella whether it's sacred or secular – new or old – you really hear the voices,” she replied. “They really shine when they sing unaccompanied.”

The Concert Association has been presenting fine musicians – some relatively unknown, others world-famous – for almost 40 years.

The first concert, presented in 1976, took place in the Orangeville District Secondary School's “cafetorium” and included the Obernkirchen Children's Choir from Austria.

In the beginning, the focus of choice for the concerts was on classical music. However, in subsequent years, the OCA board decided to extend the style of music they host to include jazz (which descends directly from classical, really) and folk or “roots”. The result is that, every season from September to March, there is the opportunity to enjoy some remarkably talented and diverse artists. Part of the mission of the OCA has been to contract rising Canadian musicians of various styles while they are still in the early times of their careers. Then, it has been a pleasure to observe how those artists' careers have soared.

Of course, many well-established, international stars have graced the stage of the Opera House at the invitation of OCA: Mark DuBois, Quartetto Gelato, Maureen Forrester, Moe Koffman, Leahy and the Canadian Brass, to name a few.

At the moment, with a new generation of members in OCA's Board of Directors, they are actively looking for new sponsors, and patrons to support the future concerts after nearly four decades of fine musical shows.

Additionally, as this is very much a community organization, they are keen to invite new members to their Board, the main job of which is to, in a very democratic way, choose the artists to be engaged for the next seasons.

This year, the 2014/15 OCA season includes three other concerts -? Jason Wilson and Dave Swarbrick, the Barry Elmes Quintet (jazz) and soprano Rebecca Caine, accompanied by pianist Robert Kortgaard.

Saturday's concert will be at 8 p.m. Tickets for the concert or full season can be purchased at the Opera House Box Office at 87 Broadway; telephone 519-942-3423.

For inquiries about subscriptions and donations as sponsors and patrons, contact the OCA at OrangevilleConcerts.ca