

GPCC spring concert features first-time collaboration

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The Grosse Pointe Community Chorus opens its spring concert, “Let Us Sing You a Story!” with a piece inspired by an actual story written by a 5-year-old and his siblings.

The program, which begins at 7 p.m. Saturday, May 2, at the Christian A. Fenton Performing Arts Center at Grosse Pointe North High School, includes several spring-themed songs, as well as one created through a partnership with the Sing Me a Story Foundation.

“They contacted us last fall,” said Sandra Mengel, chorus president.

“They partner ensembles with composers and kids who wrote stories.”



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Community Chorus Director Kayvon Kashani-Gharavi used as inspiration to compose a song.

“I ended up taking their story and making it into a narrative instead of a story — a snapshot of what was happening on the farm,” he said. “Then I whittled it into a poem.

“The way I compose, everything we do as singers is in service to the story,” he added. “That’s how I approached writing this piece.”

Because the story is set on a farm, for example, the composer researched bluegrass fiddle music, then determined how to translate that into piano music.

“With bluegrass and country, there’s often a statement and an instrumental fill,” he said. “So there’s a lot of back and forth — a group statement, a solo response. There’s a lot of singing through phrases in the poem.”

In the story when the group takes a tractor ride and gets lost in the woods, the music slows and becomes dramatic, he added.

“Then the violin comes into play and leads them back to the farm,” Kashani-Gharavi said.

“Often the composer is not part of the chorus,” Mengel explained. “The composer is usually a third entity who writes the song and sends it to the chorus. In this case, Kayvon said he’d write it.”

The composition took months to piece together. Kashani-Gharavi accounted for every pitch, rhythmic value, lyric, dynamic contrast and note involved. He wrote parts for soprano, alto, tenor and bass, as well as the piano accompaniment, to be performed by Ron Pietrantoni.

“It was a slow process,” said Kashani-Gharavi, who also is a full-time vocal

coach and is conducting Grosse Pointe Theatre's current production of "Matilda." "I'm very familiar with the capabilities of the chorus, so it's not an overly complex piece. I wanted to make it something they'd all pick up quickly and easily."

To commemorate the partnership, the GPCC created a keepsake book detailing the kids' original story, Kashani-Gharavi's notes and lyrics, as well as the song itself.

The remainder of the spring concert will include a selection of music that focuses on rebirth, renewal and positivity.

"In December, we had some Christmas music, but I wanted to focus mainly on winter, on the feelings associated with the season: It's getting darker and colder, everyone's hunkering down," Kashani-Gharavi said. "... Now this concert, I'm flipping it. Instead of dark and gloomy, now it's all about rebirth and rejuvenation, good memories."

The lineup includes "Michigan Morn," "The Coolin," "Apple Tree," "Sleep" and the French "Dirait-on."

"The choir may not love it when I pick French music, but I love singing in a foreign language," Kashani-Gharavi said. "It gives a glimpse into another culture."

"Come to the Woods" is an 11 1/2-minute song and "the most challenging song this choir has done to date," he added. "It's a narrative of experiencing a heavy rain thunderstorm. It's a musical representation of what we all did as kids: Opening the door and standing in front of the screen to watch the sky open."

The concert continues with "Only in Sleep" — one of the director's favorite choral pieces of all time — "Earth Song," "I Believe in Springtime" and "Peace Song."

The latter was written by Kashani-Gharavi's graduate school professor at Westminster.

"The text is simple," he said. "There's so much energy, so much back and forth between voices. It's a long, sweeping, lyrical statement."

The spring concert marks the GPCC's first time performing at Grosse Pointe North. The larger space was necessary to accommodate the growing choir's nearly 80 members.

The group is expecting a larger audience as well, with the addition of the young authors, their family and friends, as well as representatives from Penrickton, who will receive recognition during the hour-long program.

Tickets are \$20, \$5 for ages 12 and younger, and may be purchased online at grossepointecommunitychorus.org/event-list or by scanning the QR code, right.

The partners

Penrickton Center for Blind Children is a nonprofit that specializes in working with legally blind children, ages 1 to 12, who have at least one additional handicap. It offers five-day residential, day care and consultation/evaluation services. Its individualized programs are designed to promote independence in all aspects of daily living. For more information, visit penrickton.org.

The Sing Me a Story Foundation works with dozens of partners throughout the country. Its purpose is to bring a voice to children in need by combining their imaginations with the talents of songwriters to create stories and songs for others to enjoy.

"The Sing Me a Story website is impressive," Mengel said. "They store all the songs that have been written, so it's a platform for composers, a platform for

agency partners.”

It also keeps a log of every story written, as well as a list of songwriters. For more information, visit singmeastory.org.

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