

Singing a brand new tune

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Musically, they certainly had the chops. Financially, however, they weren't making it.

So when the decision came to disband longtime Eden-Prairie based chorus World Voices after 13 years, charter member Dan Digre of Eden Prairie and others led the singers to a new, more sustainable model, an all-volunteer organization with no paid staff and no permanent artistic director.

"The group had a need to find a sustainable model based on the economy," said Dan Digre of Eden Prairie, president of Singers in Accord's leadership board. "I have a business background and took this on as a business challenge."

The new group is a singer-led choral ensemble that features performances of culturally diverse choral music. For each concert, the group collaborates with a new conductor, performing artist or artistic ensemble to create distinctive concert experiences for both its singers and audiences. The chorus strives to enrich the cultural life of the community through outreach, education and innovative performances.

Given the current economic challenges facing nonprofit arts ensembles, the chorus was forced to re-invent itself to make it in today's economic climate.

"World Voices existed for 13 seasons and did quite well. But it was difficult financial times," said Mike Borg of Eden Prairie, a member of both World Voices and Singers in Accord. "It was decided it was time to end, but there were a lot of us who wanted to stay together. We really enjoyed the experience.

"We asked ourselves how can we continue? It was really great music," Borg continued. "There was an opportunity to create an organization without the overhead, with an all-volunteer structure. That way we could take the best of our experiences and go forward. There was a tremendous amount of talent in that group."

Thus, Phoenix-like, Singers in Accord was born out of the ashes of World Voices.

"The unique story with our group is that we have no paid staff and no permanent artistic director," said Digre. "We have a working board of directors, each of whom leads a team of volunteers from amongst the chorale to accomplish all organizational tasks. We strive to perform free concerts where possible or charge the bare minimum, so that all people can enjoy the benefits of a high quality concert experience, regardless of their financial situation."

A majority of the new chorale were also members of World Voices.

Next concert

The group's first concert was in November with guest director, Jerry Rubino, a Twin Cities choral conductor that worked many years with Dale Warland. In February, Singers in Accord brought in a collaborator and clinician from Boston, Nick Page, to collaborate with two area high schools.

They will perform Mahler's 2nd Symphony with the MYS Symphony Orchestra and the Minnesota Chorale Sunday, April 25, at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. For their fourth concert of the year, the

group will conduct an outreach concert with the Green Lake Bluegrass Band at Faith Lutheran Church in Spicer.

Concertgoers are asked for offering to help sustain the chorus, but the sustaining model is to keep expenses low.

“Our goal is to bring the musical experience to as many people as we can,” said Borg.

“We wanted to still have a product singers and audiences would enjoy,” noted Digre, who also spent 13 years with World Voices, which officially disbanded in September 2009.

“The leadership team started meeting in December of 2008,” Digre said. “It was more than about raising money. We asked ourselves, what can we do with what we have? We had a great group of people already and a music library, which was very, very important.

“The reason we chose to go this way was because so many of us had sung together for so many years,” he added. “We had a lot of very strong interpersonal relationships.”

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Among the biggest changes is the all-volunteer nature of the new chorus. There are six board teams to handle the workload: artistic, financial, marketing, administrative, technology (developing social media, Web sites, text messaging, etc.) and a process team that helps the group stays functional and are doing what we say we’re doing, Digre noted.

“The singers pick the singers and the collaborating conductor,” Digre said. “It’s quite unusual. I don’t know anyone else who is doing this. There’s lots to be gained.”

Finding a different conductor for each concert has both pluses and minuses, Borg said. The minuses are obviously getting everybody on the same page musically. The pluses include getting to work with a diverse range of conductors who bring a variety of skills to each practice and performance set. Rather than a conductor setting the bar for the group, the group members set their own standards.

“We’re conductor proof,” Borg said smiling. “We set the standards for ourselves.”

“We really rely now on each other and become more comprehensive in the process,” said Penny Meier, who serves as the marketing team leader for the group.

A dedicated group

With a rather revolutionary way of doing business, group members must be especially dedicated.

“Our main goal right now is to develop sustainability,” Digre noted. “We have very heavy reliance on

people in the group to volunteer. We're trying to sustain a culture of volunteerism. Creating that kind of a culture is one of the important things we're trying to do."

The music the group chooses is varied and multicultural, reflecting Singers in Accord's origins in World Voices.

The choral group is set this year at about 35 members, almost all of whom are former World Voices members. Next year the group will be interested in adding new members, which is by audition.

"By auditioning members we set a very high standard to the vocal product," said Borg.

"Our strengths are that we have a tremendous amount of talent, and willingness to participate in a self-governing environment," added Borg. "And everything comes from all the members. So many people in this organization have contributed to its success."

The group rehearses two and a half hours each week at Mayflower Community Congregational Church in Minneapolis.

For more information, see the Web site at www.singersinaccord.org [2].

Minnesota: The land of 10,000 choirs

According to a 2008 study by Chorus America and the National Endowment for the Arts, an estimated 32.5 million adults regularly sing in choruses, up from 23.5 million estimated in 2003. When children are included, there are 42.6 million Americans singing in choruses in 2009.

Minnesota, and the Twin Cities, has traditionally been one of the nation's strongest areas for choruses. Vibrant state college choral programs provide a steady stream of new voices.

More than 18 percent of households nationwide report one or more adults currently participate in a chorus. When children are added, participation jumps to almost 23 percent.

Choral singing is the most popular form of participation in the performing arts for both adults and children. There are an estimated 270,000 choruses in the U.S., including community choruses, or a school or church choir. The total includes about 12,000 professional and community choruses, some 41,000 school choruses and 216,000 religious choirs.

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