

ARTS & CALENDAR

Local sacred choir is surprise hit in Latvia

Two Riversiders sang in virtual concert during pandemic



by Michelle Dybal May 18, 2021



The Rev. Dennis Lauritsen, pastor of Saints Peter and Paul Church in Riverside. (Alex Rogals/Staff Photographer)

Lux Cantorum Chicago (LCC), a choir of 25 voices whose mission is to share the “transformative power of sacred choral music” has taken its local voices singing from their hometowns, including Oak Park and Riverside, and reached audiences around the world – particularly, Latvia – transcended borders during the pandemic.

According to LCC board member and Oak Park resident Stuart Jamieson, the group is “an interfaith choir that sings sacred music from all kinds of traditions and cultures.”

In April, Lux Cantorum released their performance of “Dod, Dievīpi,” which translates to “Give, God,” by composer Raimonds Tiguls and lyricist Nora Ikstena, written in 2008. Both are Latvian. The release has garnered nearly 3,500 views on YouTube. Other 2021 releases by LCC have approximately 500 views.

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From top left: Stuart Barnes Jamieson, Dan Rogers, Wilbert O. Watkins, Joan Hutchinson, Lauren Zylstra and Mary Léger stand for a photo together on the steps of Pilgrim Congregational Church Of Oak Park on Lake Street. (Alex Rogals/Staff Photographer)

Having performed Tigels' "Moonlight Sound Design" in 2019 and getting a "hearty response" from both Lux Cantorum singers and audiences, Artistic Director Dr. Wilber Watkins decided to explore other works by the composer.

"I came across 'Dod, Dieviņi,' which had a folk-like and yet ethereal feel to it," Watkins said.

He was working on a concert for May 2020, "Encounter," which was later cancelled due to COVID-19. Instead, individual recordings of music for that concert are being released each month, beginning in February 2021.

"The Latvian work speaks of God's providence and fit nicely in the musical amalgamation that I envisioned," he said.

Adding to the interest of the performance after its release was coverage in Latvian media. An article appeared on Latvians.com. And, when Ikstena appeared on Latvian TV to promote her book, she was asked about Lux Cantorum's performance.

"It made me very happy, because that shows us that culture has no boundaries and is not limited by a pandemic," the lyricist said. "This American choir has recorded this song in the Latvian language – in very beautiful, good Latvian language – this is a sign that for culture and spirit there are no boundaries; even the boundaries of a pandemic are broken."

Watkins, who has conducted the choir since 2007, said, "The work presented a challenge in diction, as none of our members are Latvian speakers."

He found and worked with a Latvian speaker and singer who created Latvian diction files for the choir and was available to answer questions along the way.

While the group is a sacred choral ensemble, the sacred works span religions. "Study War No More," released on May 9, is of Jewish origins. "Chant of the Sixth Patriarch," a Buddhist piece, releases on May 21, and the group is recording "Shalom" which will post to the choir's website on June 4.

While all their recordings are available for free, Lux Cantorum has not had an in-person performance since December 2019, and thus been unable to collect revenue from ticket sales. LCC is suggesting a donation to offset their production expenses for the professionally edited videos.

The group typically performs at least one concert at Pilgrim Congregational Church, 460 Lake St., Oak Park, each season, as well as a holiday concert in December at Sts. Peter and Paul Lutheran Church, 250 Woodside Rd., Riverside, in non-pandemic times.

Watkins is choir director at Pilgrim. Lux Cantorum accompanist, Joan Hutchinson, of Oak Park, is organist and minister of music at Pilgrim. Local members of LCC include Oak Parkers Mary Leger, soprano; Lauren Zylstra, soprano; Brandon Michaels, tenor; and Dan Rogers, tenor.

Dina Schenk, soprano, is from Riverside, and is Sts. Peter and Paul Pastor the Rev. Dennis Lauritsen, who sings bass.

Lauritsen, who is also an LCC board member, has sung in the choir for seven years. It was from hearing them sing at his church that gave him the idea to audition.

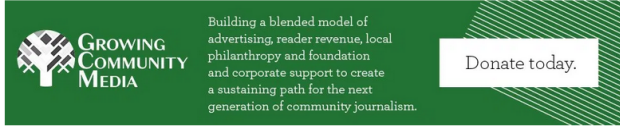
"I distinctly remember one concert when I thought to myself, 'You know, they're sounding really good. It's been a long time since I've sung with a choir like this,'" Lauritsen said. "I had always sung with choirs in church, school, college and seminary, and this seemed like an opportunity to return to one of my deepest loves in life."

Because of the pandemic, for the monthly releases of "Encounter," members rehearsed

remotely and recorded their parts individually, compiled in the editing to form completed works.

“It really has been an experience of a lifetime, even during the pandemic, that I never expected after all these years,” Lauritsen said. “There’s nothing quite like the transcendent, mystical experience of voices drawn together from many different places as bearers of peace, unity, gentleness, beauty, truth, compassion, love and praise.”

You can view the music of Lux Cantorum online at luxcantorum.org/encounter-performance-series



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