

Artist of the Month

Timeless Sound

The State College Choral Society celebrates its 70th season of music that seeks to transcend time and place

By Thomas Leffler



Nothing brings together an audience like timeless music.

Some may associate this phrase with their favorite rock band or pop artist, but many in central Pennsylvania associate it with the State College Choral Society.

The choral society, with its dedication to classical choral music productions, is preparing for its 70th season, with music director Russell Shelley at the helm.

“Our mission is to provide significant classical choral music to the Centre Region,” Shelley says. “And the word

'significant' suggests value, requires value.”

Attendees of choral society concerts have gotten that value out of shows for 70 years now, with the sound remaining authentic throughout new generations of chorus members.

“The longevity can be attributed to our repertoire, the music we perform, because it truly is timeless,” Shelley says.

Beginning in December 1948 as a 35-member Women's Club chorus in State College, the choral society proper began when the club's musical section invited men to help in their performance of Bach's *Mass in B minor*.

The choral society currently has about 140 members, the largest choral group to perform a classical repertoire in central Pennsylvania.

The choral society is a key collaborator in projects with other community music groups, such as the Nittany Valley Symphony, the Nittany Valley Children's Choir, and the Pennsylvania Chamber Orchestra.

To last through various eras of music, retaining popularity in concert, requires great persistence from those involved and a commitment to creation of the “timeless” sound.

“Our focus is on music that would have more longevity; it is not composed for a particular time and place,” Shelley says. “It seeks to transcend contemporaneous time and place.”

Cultivating a choir that can perform anywhere, at any time, with ease and efficiency has been Shelley's continued vision for the choral society.

“The music that we perform, we believe, explores the shared human reality across time and places,” he

says.

The enthusiasm among members remains strong.

“We had our first rehearsal of the season last night, and the energy is amazing. When we fire back up for the fall, it's pretty thrilling,” Shelley says of a recent session.

The first performance of the society's 70th season, the *Festival of Psalms*, will take place Saturday, October 20, at the Grace Lutheran Church in State College, the perfect environment for the “festive” psalms picked out by Shelley.

“[The concert] tries to capture everything that a choir can do,” Shelley says.



The State College Choral Society performs in concert. The choral society's 70th season will begin October 20.

Beginning as a concept 30 years ago, Shelley and his chorus decided to add new psalms to the traditional concert repertoire. Variety is the spice of this show, with a rhythmically based Brazilian piece sharing the spotlight with pieces from Jewish, American, and traditional Western European composers.

“We've picked music that spans 300 years and three distinct cultures, [that] explores the full palette of choral technique,” Shelley says.

In December, the fourth annual *Christmas with the Choral Society* concert also takes place at the Grace Lutheran

Church, given as a free production as a gift to the community. The performance begins at 3 p.m. on Saturday, December 8.

Instead of paying for admission, the audience is encouraged to bring a canned good or non-perishable food item to benefit the State College Area Food Bank. The choral society has collected more than 2,500 pounds of food for those in need over the past three years.

Crossing the 1,000-pound mark last winter, Shelley says that the goal is always to top the previous year's number. This year's winter extravaganza includes performances from Centre Brass, Rutter Gloria, and local school choirs.

Finishing the season with a challenging, exciting piece, the choral society's *70th Gala Concert* features a performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. More than 200 performers will take the stage, including the Pennsylvania Chamber Orchestra and the State High Master Singers.

“We have professional soloists that we're bringing in from out of town with established careers, big names,” Shelley says.

Some of these big names include baritone Timothy LeFebvre, soprano Laura Choi Stuart, mezzo-soprano Amanda Silliker, and tenor Benjamin Warschawski.

The production will take place in a packed Eisenhower Auditorium on Sunday, April 28, 2019. ***T&G***

For more information on the State College Choral Society, visit scchoralsociety.org.