



COURTESY OF LEXINGTON SINGERS AND BEL CANTO PHOTOGRAPHY

The Lexington Singers' annual performances of *Messiah* are a cherished tradition for many.

MAKING BEAUTIFUL MUSIC

THE LEXINGTON SINGERS DELIGHTS
AUDIENCES IN LEXINGTON — AND
AROUND THE WORLD



By Robin Roenker / Photos by Joseph Rey Au

This past summer, people lined up two-deep for several blocks to see The Lexington Singers perform — in Spain. The local singing group's international tour was such a success it packed one Seville church with 900 attendees while turning 200 more patrons away at the door because there was no more room inside.

“Audience members were lined up for blocks” to see the group perform Mozart, Broadway hits, and original Spanish music, said Jefferson Johnson, who has served as The Lexington Singers’ music director and conductor for the past 18 years. “At first we didn’t know the line was for us. It was an amazing experience. The Lexington Singers truly do have an international reputation. And if you look across the country at cities the size of Lexington, there aren’t many others — if any at all — that have a commu-

Clockwise from left, Ernie Stamper at the Singers’ first rehearsal of the season at Central Baptist Church; music director and conductor Jefferson Johnson leads the group; schedule for the 2016-17 season

nity singing group the size of ours that is as active and as vibrant.”

Founded in 1958 and entering its 58th season, The Lexington Singers is one of the oldest continuously performing independent community choral groups in America. The roughly 180 singers in the adult choir range in age from their early 20s to late 70s and come from every walk of life. Their common bond is their love of singing.

The group’s musical talents have taken it around the world, from Brazil to Spain, and across the country to America’s most prestigious performance halls, including Carnegie Hall and The

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—Jefferson Johnson

Kennedy Center — where members will perform again next April 10. The Singers has performed numerous times at Keeneland as well.

Locally, audiences delight in the Singers’ rich and varied repertoire, which this season includes both blues and music of

The Beatles alongside complex classical works like Igor Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms*.

Each December, The Lexington Singers packs the Singletary Center for its moving performance of Handel’s *Messiah* — including its show-stopping version

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Left, Will Whalen practices with the group. In their festive choral gowns, the Singers delight a holiday audience at the Singletary Center.

of “The Hallelujah Chorus” — as well as festive songs of the season during the University of Kentucky School of Music’s beloved annual “Collage: A Holiday Spectacular.” The Lexington Singers is also an annual presence at Lexington’s downtown Christmas tree lighting and the city’s Fourth of July festival.

“People tell me often that Lexington Singers concerts have become part of their family holiday traditions,” said Johnson, who is also an instructor and director of choral activities at UK, where he directs the graduate program in choral music and conducts the University Chorale and Men’s Chorus. “It’s really rewarding to be part of the community-building that arts can play. And, within our group, we’re like a large family. Making music together is something that tends to bond people pretty quickly and pretty closely.”

Pursuing perfection

In mid-September, The Lexington Singers reconvened for its weekly, two-and-a-half-hour Monday evening practices after a short summer hiatus. Almost immediately, the rehearsal space at Central Baptist Church was awash in beautiful harmonies as members explored the music to *Symphony of Psalms* — part of its Nov. 18 concert with the UK Wind Ensemble and the UK Chorale — for the first time.

Johnson, directing with pencil-as-baton in hand, had an easy, familial rapport with members as he shepherded the singers through the challenging new piece and its Latin phrases.

“No breath! No breath! You might

expire, but you can’t breathe there!” he joked at one point, to laughter from the group.

Part of the appeal of The Lexington Singers is the opportunity afforded to amateur music lovers to train and sing under the tutelage of someone as esteemed as Johnson, who is accustomed to conducting elite singers and doctorate-level vocal majors, said Jessi Jump, The Lexington Singers’ business director. “It’s a group of non-professionals, performing at a professional level,” she said.

“Everyone adores Jeff,” said Cora Hughes, a 30-year veteran of the group and its current president. “He is such a perfectionist. But he has the most positive way of getting the best out of every-

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At Central Baptist Church the Singers tune up for the upcoming season under the direction of Jefferson Johnson.

body. He's never negative. Everyone wants to be on task and be part of what we're doing because they know when we perform something, it's going to be the best it can possibly be."

Like a family

In addition to the adult group, The Lexington Singers organization also includes four separate children's choirs, which together have roughly 120 members ranging from kindergartners to high school seniors.

"Some of our members may go on to study music," said Lori Hetzel, who has served as The Lexington Singers' Children's Choir artistic director since the group's founding 14 years ago. "But a fact I'm much more proud of is not trying to make music majors out of them but to make them lifelong lovers of choral music."

At a recent rehearsal of The Lexington Singers' Children's Chamber Choir, comprising mostly high school students, 16-year-old soprano Leila Abou-Jaoude said the group offers her a chance to take part in a chorus when otherwise she'd miss out.

"Because of scheduling issues at school in terms of other classes I want to take, I could never participate in choir," said the Lafayette High School junior. "So for me this was a wonderful opportunity to take part in a choir group outside of school."

Fellow soprano Lily Kate Reed, also a Lafayette junior, said The Lexington Singers Children's Chamber Choir offers her a chance to "better myself as a musician and meet people who love to sing, like I do."

That sentiment is echoed by members of The Lexington Singers adult choir as well.



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RING IN THE HOLIDAYS WITH THE LEXINGTON SINGERS



The Lexington Singers will perform in the annual "Collage: A Holiday Spectacular" on Dec. 3 at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. and on Dec. 4 at 3 p.m. at the Singletary Center for the Arts. Its performance of Handel's *Messiah* will be held Dec. 9 at 7:30 p.m. at the Singletary Center for the Arts. Call 859-257-4929 or visit SingletaryCenter.org for tickets to either concert.

For more information about The Lexington Singers or to make a contribution online, go to lexsing.org.



"I just love being able to sing with this group and the tremendous individuals who are a part of it," said Ed Brand, who has been a member for 32 years.

Nick Lawrence, longtime host of WUKY's "Curtains @ 8" radio program, said simply: "This group is like a family. Last year I had to have shoulder surgery, and they rallied around me, sending cards, letters, jokes, and food."

And for 20-year Lexington Singers veteran Rita Stamey, the group offers a much-needed artistic outlet. "I work in Fayette County's alternative school for students with behavior issues. And my job can be very stressful," she said. "On Mondays I meet some other singers for dinner and then we come to rehearsal, and it's my outlet. It's my stress reliever for the rest of the week."

Like Hughes, Brand, and Stamey, many other members stay with the group for decades. And yet the ensemble is always actively seeking new members with a flair for song.

To join the group, prospective new

members of The Lexington Singers must audition, typically in August or January. Member dues of \$125 per semester, along with private donations, help to pay for the group's paid staff members, including its four children's choir directors and three children's choir accompanists, as well as Johnson, Jump, assistant director Johnie Dean, and adult accompanist William White. Dues and donations also help provide scholarships to children's choir members for whom paying dues might be a financial obstacle. "We want to make sure that the group is open to everyone," said Jump.

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—Rita Stamey

The Singers range in age from their late 20s to their late 70s and come from all walks of life. They are united by their love of music and inspired by their music director, says the group's president, Cora Hughes, above.

After nearly six decades at the center of Lexington's arts scene, The Lexington Singers has no plans of slowing down. In coming years Johnson hopes to take the group on additional international tours, perhaps to South Africa and back to Brazil, where they enjoyed a warm reception nine years ago. And, as for music selection, Johnson intends to keep challenging the group.

"I want to continue to expose the singers to the widest possible range of music," he said. "What we're working on right now are some pretty serious pieces of 20th- and 21st-century classical music. And if you look at that music and then realize that some of those same people will also be singing the blues this fall [during an October small-group cabaret performance], it really speaks to the talent and diversity we have in this group." **KM**