

arts & culture

Celebrities of The Villages To Star in VPO Labor Day Concert

The pops concert is set for 7 p.m. Sunday at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center.

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND
Daily Sun Senior Writer

Classic goes pop at the Villages Philharmonic Orchestra's annual Labor Day pops concert.

Kicking off the VPO's 21st season is the "Labor Day Celebration Pops" concert. Spanning multiple genres, the concert features everything from Broadway tunes to country to popular American songs. Playing alongside the VPO this year is a quartet of beloved Villages performers, including vocalists Marcella Richardson, Stephen Mumbert, Norman Lee Schaffer and Clark Barrios.

"The 2024-25 concert program is very versatile, ranging from symphonic concerts, opera, oratorio and pop concerts," said maestro Pasquale Valerio, VPO music director and co-founder. "We will have extraordinary guests for each concert with resident artists and international artists of great depth."

Every year, Florida's Friendliest Hometown's resident orchestra takes a brief break during the summer. Its members fly all over the world to share their musical talents before coming back to roost at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center. The Labor Day pops concert, which is the VPO's only true pop music performance of the year, is always the inaugural concert.

The VPO was founded by Valerio and the late Oscar Feliu in 2003, when the orchestra gave its first Christmas performance. As the community and the orchestra grew over the years, Valerio and Feliu gradually put on more concerts until 2009, when the orchestra performed its first full season.

Now, the orchestra averages around 13-15 concerts per year, performing pieces that range from classical to modern, collaborating with musicians from around the world, like tenor Francesco Malapena and Bolivian-American soprano Lynette Tapia, both of whom starred in last year's finale.

But it's local artists that are the stars of the Labor Day pops concert. The soloists will be playing some all-time greatest hits, like "Love Me

Tender," "Georgia on My Mind," "The Dance," "Luck Be a Lady," "God Bless the U.S.A." and more.

"You really need to see this show," Barrios said. "It will put you in the mood for the incredible Labor Day holiday."

Barrios is part of several groups throughout The Villages, including the Clark Barrios Band. He has worked with numerous entertainers and groups in the community, including Broadway's Alex Santoriello, KC Productions, Pro-Am Performing Arts and Sue Schuler.

Most recently, Barrios was in the "Change the World" concert at The Sharon, which was produced by maestro Bill Doherty of the Central Florida Lyric Opera. He also will be in the next "Three Tenors Plus One" benefit concert.

Schaffer has been involved with the orchestra since its inception, performing mainly at the Labor Day and Christmas concerts and is eager to be performing again.

"It's a total different feeling standing on stage and hearing 50 musicians behind you playing music that's not amplified," he said. "It sends a chill up your spine. It elevates the singer to a different level."

Mumbert is also happy to be back with the VPO. Praised as a "scene stealer" with "an assured and stylish technique," the baritone is a favorite among patrons and critics alike.

"I am so excited to be joining your Villages Philharmonic Orchestra and maestro Pasquale Valerio for this timeless American tradition and holiday," he said.

Rounding out the lineup is Richardson, president of the VPO's board and one of The Sharon's legacy acts. She's also one of the few performers who can rival Schaffer's tenure. Like Schaffer, she performed at The Sharon back when it was Church on the Square. Now, she is a regular guest vocalist.

"It's been such an honor to help Pasquale to continue to realize his vision," Richardson said. "I call him the mad scientist of the music realm."

Richardson, Schaffer, Mumbert and Barrios usher in the VPO's 21st season at 7 p.m. Sunday at The Sharon. Tickets are \$40 and up. Go to thevillagesentertainment.com.

Variety Is the Spice Of Starlight Players New Production

The club will present "The Celebrity Connection" at 6:30 p.m. Sept. 7-8 at SeaBreeze Recreation.

By MICHAEL FORTUNA
Daily Sun Staff Writer

For its next show, the Starlight Players will revive the variety shows of yesteryear.

In "The Celebrity Connection," co-directed and co-written by Connie Latzer and Maureen McKenna, the resident performing troupe will portray some of the biggest celebrities and memorable moments from throughout the years, from Willie Nelson to Barbra Streisand to Adele to Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gormé to Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller.

"We wanted to try something a little different," McKenna said. "We wanted to bring back celebrities and remind people of who they are and what they did."

"It's not a dramatic thing," she said. "It's comedy, music, all of that."

The Starlight Players is a resident lifestyle group for people who have an all-around, "Hey kids, let's put on a show" spirit. The group has been around for more than a decade, creating and presenting about two shows a year. Their shows don't follow a specific format, they are more a product of their collective creative juices, with generous amounts of music and comedy.

The group welcomes resident singers, actors and comedians of any skill level to participate, as well as those interested in working behind the scenes.

Members have been working on the show since May, which is a shorter rehearsal time than they're used to.

"People put a lot of hard work into this," said McKenna, of the Village of Buttonwood. "We really had to make sure people knew their lines. We try to match people with songs."

This show will be a true variety show for a TV generation from a generation ago.

McKenna has a couple of small roles in the production, including playing "Mama" Cass Elliott and Joan Crawford.

"She's one of my favorite actresses," McKenna said of Crawford. "I jumped at the chance to play her. It's like being a teenager getting dressed up to go to the prom."

Alan and Barbara Sneider will portray Sonny and Cher in the program — with a surprise or two in their skit.

"This is a hilarious show," Barbara said.

Patricia Crimi will play comedian Totie Fields singing "Put on a Happy Face." Crimi remembered seeing Fields on TV decades ago.

"The song fits her personality," said Crimi, of the Village of Liberty Park.

Crimi, who sang a bit in high school, joined the Starlight Players in 2012. This group marked her first time acting and singing on stage.

"I enjoy entertaining the audience," Crimi said. "This show is very good. It brings out people's different personalities with a lot of singing and comedy."

Lynne Albers plays Barbra Streisand. She's excited to sing "Evergreen."

"It's my great honor to play Barbra," said Albers, of the Village of Orange Blossom Gardens. "I used to sing that years ago when my baby was



Michael Fortuna | Daily Sun

Jim McCraw and Sandy Thomas, of the Village of LaBelle, are re-creating an Alka-Seltzer commercial as part of the Starlight Players' upcoming production "The Celebrity Connection," presented Sept. 7-8 at SeaBreeze Recreation.

first born. It's a song about the value of love."

Albers has enjoyed Streisand's music for at least 40 years, starting around the time her children were young.

"She has social class," Albers said. "She never wavered from that. Some people just sing. She used her voice as an instrument."

Albers has been a part of the Starlight Players for about 14 years.

Don't touch that dial — "The Celebrity Connection" also throws in a few vintage commercials. Sandy Thomas and Jim McCraw will re-enact the Alka-Seltzer commercial from the 1970s remembered for the line, "I can't believe I ate the whole thing."

They're even wearing their own pajamas for their costumes.

"We want to look the part," said McCraw, of the Village of LaBelle.

Thomas also will make an

appearance in a nod to the famous "Where's the beef?" commercials from Wendy's in the 1980s.

The couple joined the Starlight Players about five years ago.

"It's fun. I've enjoyed getting into different characters," Thomas said.

"The Celebrity Connection" will take place at 6:30 p.m. Sept. 7-8 at SeaBreeze Recreation. Reserved table seating tickets for Villages residents and their guests with proper ID are \$10 and are available by calling 479-899-7934. Proceeds from the performances will go to the Orange Blossom Gardens Lions Club.

People can bring their own drinks and snacks to enjoy.

The Starlight Players puts on two shows a year. They average around 30 people in each production.

The group rehearses at 9 a.m. Fridays at SeaBreeze Recreation. For information, call 479-899-7934.



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