

arts & culture

VPO Presents ‘Messiah’ to Kick Off The Holidays

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND
Daily Sun Senior Writer

The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center’s resident orchestra ushers in the holiday season with a time-honored community tradition.

Part One of “Messiah,” also known as the Nativity, has opened The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra’s holiday season every year since 2008. Composed by George Frideric Handel in 1741, “Messiah” is an orchestral piece of music that encompasses the life of Jesus Christ in 53 movements and concludes with the Hallelujah Chorus.

“It’s a masterwork based on the scripture of the Bible, narrating the nativity of Jesus,” said maestro Pasquale Valerio, co-founder and director of the VPO. “And, as a music composition, it’s incredibly done. A masterpiece can affect every musician playing it, conducting or singing.”

“Messiah” is widely considered one of Handel’s best-known works and one of the world’s most enduring oratorios. Written in only 24 days, it was first performed in Dublin on April 13, 1742, and received its London premiere nearly a year later. The oratorio eventually gained momentum and became one of the most popular holiday concerts, particularly during the Advent season.



Daily Sun file photo

John DePaola plays the trumpet during The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra’s annual “Messiah” performance at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center.

Traditionally divided into three parts that cover the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, “Messiah” is played during the holiday season around the world. The death and resurrection parts are typically performed closer to Easter, but the VPO currently only covers the Nativity.

Valerio said that in the two decades since he and the late Oscar Feliu founded the orchestra, “Messiah” remains one of his favorite performances in the VPO’s repertoire. For him, the concert represents the start of the holiday season.

“It’s a pleasure for me to celebrate the opening of the season with the concert,” Valerio said. “Plus, it’s a tradition, and there is nothing more important in The Villages than tradition.”

The concert consists of the VPO, the Opera Orlando chorus and four special guest vocalists. Among the guest vocalists are soprano Julie Batman, mezzo-soprano Emily Heumann, tenor Nathan Munson and bass-baritone Stephen Mumbert.

For Batman, “Messiah” represents much more than the start of the holiday season. It’s the fulfillment of a lifelong dream.

“I grew up singing ‘Messiah’ with my mom,” Batman said. “She would play piano while a sang”

The young soprano idolized her mother and has done her best to follow in her footsteps, including becoming a music teacher and a church musician. Part of the reason Batman started performing in The Villages was to be closer to her mother, who is a Village of Caroline resident, and to have the opportunity to perform for her. Now, Batman gets to perform in front of her mom each year in one of their favorite shows.

Batman plays the role of the angel who descends to inform the world of Jesus Christ’s impending birth. It’s a very sacred work, she said — one that a lot of people say marks the official start of Christmas.

“There’s just something very magical about it,” Batman said. “It’s a very powerful work, and I think it endures because we are using the liturgy of the Bible — and it’s Handel, who is amazing.”

The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra will perform “Messiah” at 7 p.m. Nov. 19 at The Sharon. Tickets are \$40 and up. Go to thevillagesentertainment.com.

‘Don’t Tell Nonnie’ Returns to Lobby At The Sharon

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND
Daily Sun Senior Writer

Gather your sheet music and muster up some courage because everyone’s favorite open mic night is back.

“Don’t Tell Nonnie” is a longstanding tradition at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center and beloved by area residents who love to sing and listen to others belt their best. It usually takes place a few times a year, generating excitement among those who eagerly wait for the event to appear on The Sharon’s calendar.

The event was created by Whitney Morse, granddaughter of The Sharon’s namesake and artistic director of The Sharon and The Studio Theatre Tierra Del Sol. She was inspired by Don’t Tell Mama, a piano bar that was one of her favorite haunts when she lived in New York. For The Villages’ version, “Mama” became “Nonnie,” which was what she and her cousins called their grandmother, Sharon L. Morse, when they were children.

Morse announced the date of the next “Don’t Tell Nonnie” at Russell Stephens’ “Never Have I Ever: Songs From the Bucket List” cabaret.

“If you loved (‘Never Have I Ever’), then you will love ‘Don’t Tell Nonnie,’” Morse said. “It is an open mic cabaret of sorts,

where you bring your sheet music and you sing songs that you like, or you could just come and watch whoever decides to show up.”

“Don’t Tell Nonnie” is open to all singers. Morse acts as host and music director Gary Powell provides accompaniment on the piano. Sheet music is provided for those who don’t bring their own.

Between numbers and cocktail refills, Morse and Powell will entertain guests with some of their favorite cabaret numbers.

Richie Lanna, who frequently performs in the “Sounds of Legends” shows at Everglades Recreation, is a regular guest.

“I like to call it karaoke for professionals, but it’s not really karaoke,” the Village of Fenney resident said. “As a singer, it’s a good place to show off your wares and have a good time.”

For those like Priscilla Baker, who comes to watch people perform, the enthusiastic and informal feel of the show makes for a relaxing, enjoyable evening. Although she’s never aspired to step up to the mic herself, the Village of Buttonwood resident has been a fan of “Don’t Tell Nonnie” since it began. She likes to get there as soon as the doors open and grab the best seat in the house.

“It’s just so much fun to see The Villages people and what

they can do,” Baker said. “It’s a great, inexpensive evening. You have a glass of wine and a bag of chips and you’re all set.”

Baker appreciates seeing Ball of the familiar faces in the audience and on stage, but a big part of the fun for her is cheering on all the amateurs who are brave enough to get on stage.

Donna Taylor, a volunteer usher and Village of Briar Meadow resident, is often the person who gives those people the encouragement they need. Her main job during “Don’t Tell Nonnie” shows is to go from table to table and coax those who didn’t sign up to sing into giving it a go.

“We have people who arrive with their music and lyrics but are hesitant to sign up,” Taylor said.

She recalls one in particular, a “very shy girl” who she could see was trying to talk herself into getting on stage from the moment she got there. Finally, toward the end of the evening, Taylor talked her into it.

“When she started her song, we immediately knew we were in for a special treat,” Taylor said. “The entire audience was blown away and gave her a standing ovation.”

Even if someone isn’t the best singer, Taylor said, there’s nothing to worry about.

“I guarantee that if you perform on The Sharon Lobby stage, you will be rewarded with a very happy audience,” she said. “Our audience is receptive, encouraging and enthusiastic.”

“Don’t Tell Nonnie” returns at 7 p.m. Nov. 14 at The Sharon. Tickets for the show are \$25. To learn more, go to thevillagesentertainment.com.

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