

VPO Closes Holiday Season With Concert At The Sharon

Special guests will perform at the orchestra's Holiday Celebration concert at 7 p.m. Dec 17 and 18.

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND
Daily Sun Senior Writer

The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra bids farewell to 2024 in a symphony of sound.

Just as The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra's performance of "The Messiah" opens The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts' holiday season in The Villages, the orchestra's annual "Holiday Celebration" concert closes out the year. This year's performance will feature special guests Mark Antonio de Villiers, Marcella Richardson, Norman Lee Schaffer, Sean Stork and Ali Molnar. It also happens to be the final concert of the orchestra's 21st holiday season.

"Music is a language that brings great memories of hope and love, especially during this time of year," said maestro Pasquale Valerio, music director of the VPO. "We relive those memories through the traditional songs prepared for the December holidays."

The concert will once again be hosted by Stork, a baritone who has performed in the Holiday Celebration for more than 10 years. He not only stars in the concert each year but does many of the arrangements as well.

Some of Stork's favorite

arrangements include "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year," which he said is like all of Christmas packed into one song, and "The Chanukah Song," which was inspired by a rendition Molnar, a lyric soprano, did on the piano. Now, Molnar sings Stork's arrangement during the annual Holiday Celebration.

"That's a special moment for me — that I get to sing the song Sean arranged with the orchestra," Molnar said.

In addition to "The Chanukah Song," Molnar's other holiday favorite is Amy Grant's "Grown Up Christmas List." She's loved it since childhood.

Both Stork and Molnar hope that audiences appreciate the immense talent of their fellow performers and how much work they put in each year to bring shows like the Holiday Celebration to life.

"I hope they take away the peace and joy of the show," Molnar said. "I hope people get the chance to relax and feel peace and joy, which is hard to come by these days."

Like Stork, Richardson also is a longtime guest performer. She is president of the VPO's board and is one of The Sharon's legacy acts. Last year, some of her most memorable songs included Amy Grant's "Breath of Heaven," which is written from the perspective of Mary before she gives birth to Jesus, "The Christmas Waltz" and Irving Berlin's "White Christmas."

Richardson feels the Holiday Celebration gives The



Norman Lee Schaffer, above, and Marcella Richardson, left, performed during The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra's Holiday Celebration concert in 2023 at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center. Both will return for this year's performance.

Photos by Rachel Govola, Daily Sun

a prominent country gospel singer, charmed audiences last year with his wit and never-ending parade of sequined suit jackets. He sang Elvis Presley's "Blue Christmas" and "I Believe in Christmas," which is an original song from his newest album, "That's My King." Both songs will be part of the upcoming program as well.

Tenor de Villiers returns to The Sharon's stage, taking the place of classic crooner Mark Raisch. He will once again be singing "Winter Wonderland" and "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

The program includes 24 holiday songs in total, including an audience-led sing-a-long of "Silent Night." Showtimes are at 7 p.m. Dec. 17-18 at The Sharon. Tickets are \$40 and up.

For more information about the concert and performers, go to thevillagesentertainment.com or thevillagesphilharmonic.org.

"We are delighted to present this program, which includes wonderful holiday pieces that have accompanied us throughout our lives," Valerio said. "We wish you a December full of love and prosperity."

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