

Finding the right notes

Eric Hannan directs both the Vancouver Cantata Singers and Douglas choral program

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Eric Hannan's smile says it all. It's the kind of smile that lights his eyes and reveals his deep and abiding love for the subject matter at hand: Music.

Specifically, choral music.

Hannan, a Burnaby resident, is the artistic director of the Vancouver Cantata Singers and the director of the choral music program at Douglas College.

He's in his book-filled office amidst the end-of-year bustle at the college - Christmas concerts have just ended, make-up lessons are in full swing, juries are about to start for voice students' examinations.



CREDIT: Larry Wright/BURNABY NOW

A joyful noise: Eric Hannan in his office at Douglas College, where he is director of the choral music program. The Burnaby resident is also artistic director of the Vancouver Cantata Singers.

But he takes time out from the whirl long enough to talk about the Cantata Singers' upcoming Christmas concert, his life in music and his continued quest to promote and maintain choral excellence in Vancouver.

Hannan is in his seventh year at the helm of the Cantata Singers.

The past year has been a busy one for the singers.

It started off on the highest of high notes as the group was named top chamber choir in the country during the CBC Choral Competition, going on to capture the grand prize for overall best choir.

The win was formal recognition that Hannan is achieving what he set out to do with the Cantata Singers.

"Although it's an amateur choir, the goal is to work at a professional level, both technically and musically," Hannan notes.

What the win also did, however, is remind Hannan how critical it is to keep achieving at that same high level - and to never settle for less than the finest performance.

Hannan started off the Cantata Singers' season in October with a concert for choir and marimba, Everlasting Light.

The choir, he notes, rose to the challenge of the demanding repertoire for that concert, and he expects no less for the rest of the season.

From a director's standpoint, that means ensuring each and every choir member is solidly a part of his quest for excellence.

Every member of the Vancouver Cantata Singers has a music degree, most in voice, and a good number are music teachers at the elementary, secondary or post-secondary level.

Hannan requires singers to reaudition every year. He's working with 21 members now but would like to expand to 28.

Finding the right voices, however, isn't always easy.

"The problem with Vancouver is there are too many choirs," he says.

He's quick to add that the plethora of choirs is a good thing: "There are so many people singing, and it's so healthy to sing."

The two-fold challenge is that it drains not only the singer pool but the audience pool as well.

Hannan admits it's always a challenge to draw an audience for a choral performance.

Some of the group's best-attended performances are those that don't necessarily draw from their usual audience pool.

In October, for instance, the choir joined the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra for *Video Games Live*, taking the stage at the Orpheum to perform live renditions of the soundtracks to video games, accompanying giant-screen video presentations.

"The Orpheum was full of gamers," Hannan says with a laugh, noting it was a change from the singers' usual repertoire. "Some of the music is actually not bad. It's a cross between *Pirates of the Caribbean* and Carl Orff, *Carmina Burana*."

The gamers in question, however, aren't necessarily going to attend other Cantata Singers' performances.

Another always-popular offering is Handel's *Messiah* - the Cantata Singers were invited by the Vancouver Chamber Choir to join this year's annual performance at the Orpheum. But, again, the *Messiah* crowd won't necessarily come to all the Cantata Singers' performances.

"A certain core audience will come, but there's so much happening in Vancouver now, it's so easy for the audience to go somewhere else," Hannan says.

That's not the case, however, with the singers' annual Christmas Reprise.

The choir stages the Christmas concert each year at Holy Rosary Cathedral in downtown Vancouver.

It's a mixture of traditional and more contemporary Christmas music designed to give people a one-hour "shopping break."

Traditionally, the concert has been free. But because of its popularity - last year, people kept filling the massive interior of Holy Rosary until they were sitting on the floor around the choir - the singers opted to offer the concert twice this year.

The Holy Rosary performance will now be by ticket, with a \$12 admission.

A free concert will then be offered the next day at St. James Anglican Church in the Downtown Eastside.

The Cantata Singers will be joined by the Pacific Ring Bell Choir, a Burnaby school district choir that's conducted by Cantata Singers' chorister Rosemary Bell (and in which one of the players is Hannan's own daughter).

For the new year, Hannan has his sights set on some new challenges for the choir, including Voices in Motion, Bodies that Sing at the Roundhouse Community Centre in March.

That concert will see the choir joined by Dancers Dancing for a choral-and-dance performance that's part of the Vancouver International Dance Festival.

Hannan notes that he continually searches for music - both longstanding works from the Western classical tradition and contemporary works - that reaches to a deeper level than merely entertainment.

"It's about moving people," he says, noting that's his key criteria for choosing concert repertoire.

"I program it because it's the music that moves me. If it doesn't move me, it's completely pointless."

Though he confesses that the Vancouver Cantata Singers are his first love, he also finds great rewards in his job at Douglas College.

It was a job, he notes, that he didn't necessarily expect he'd ever have.

Hannan came into music the way many do, taking piano lessons as a child and teenager.

He studied up to the Grade 10 Royal Conservatory of Music level while in high school, then took time out to play in a couple of rock bands.

He went back to school at age 24. With two years of sciences under his belt, he shifted his focus to music. His original major was in composition, in which he earned his bachelor's degree from the University of British Columbia.

It was through his composition studies that he started singing, and he soon discovered a love for choral music.

And he realized that composition wasn't where his heart lay. Instead, he found his niche in conducting, studying under the mentorship of James Fankhauser at UBC.

He went on to graduate studies in conducting at the universities of Michigan and Illinois.

After that, he admits, he assumed he'd end up working at some small liberal arts college in the States, since opportunities for full-time work in Canada were limited.

But timing was on his side. Fankhauser went on sabbatical just as Hannan finished his studies, and Hannan took that job for a year. Then he was able to serve a couple more years as a sessional lecturer at UBC.

Right after that, the job at Douglas College came open, and Hannan's been there ever since.

Along with teaching voice, he conducts the Douglas College Chorale, a 14-voice chamber choir - a group he finds rewarding, he says, because the students are all capable and they all want to be there.

What makes the teaching part of the job worthwhile, he says, is the discovery of those talented students who apply themselves and really want to learn.

Not all will go on to professional singing careers - "you have to be one in a million to get work as a singer, or at least one in a thousand," Hannan points out - but helping to nurture promising talents is part of Hannan's reward.

At home, too, Hannan finds himself nurturing a love of music in the next generation - his younger daughter plays clarinet in band, his elder daughter is a singer who had the starring role in Burnaby South's production of Annie last year and who took the stage with the Cantata Singers last year, at age 14, for their Christmas concert.

Hannan confesses that he's no "cheerleader" - he's not the person to ask to work with people who aren't committed and who don't want to be learning.

"Cantata Singers don't need a cheerleader. They need someone to go after the music and get it right," he notes.

That's not to say that it's easy work.

"It's the amount of emotional energy that has to go into a rehearsal that makes it so draining," he says.

And there's the pressure in knowing that, come performance time, the success or failure of the moment rests on your shoulders.

"When you're the leader, everything is your fault," he says frankly. "You have to make people sing."

There's no one secret to making musical magic happen, he says, but he has some basic philosophies for leading singers.

"You have to love them all, first and foremost, because if you don't, they perceive that," he says.

"The other thing is, you cannot accept mediocrity."

Being a leader, too, means having to be concerned with the non-musical aspects of running a choir such as the Cantata Singers - not the least of which is finding funding in an economy in which both public and private funds are being squeezed dry.

And it also means not spending as much time pursuing his own passion for singing as he'd like.

"What I really do miss is singing. I don't have the opportunity to sing," he says. "I'd like to sing more."

But what makes the whole job rewarding, he says, is the energy he gets in return from his choirs, both the Vancouver Cantata Singers and the Douglas College Chorale.

"They give it back," he says.

And there's the knowledge that, for those audience members who love to experience top-calibre choral music, the Vancouver Cantata Singers offer them that opportunity.

"There's a certain core audience we have that would really be put out if we changed who we are," he says.

And he smiles again.

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The Vancouver Cantata Singers' A Christmas Reprise runs Saturday, Dec. 20 at 2 p.m. at Holy Rosary Cathedral, Richards and Dunsmuir in Vancouver.

Tickets are \$12 and are available through the Cantata Singers office by phone at 604-730-8856 or online at www.vancouvercantatasingers.com.

It runs again on Sunday, Dec. 21 at 2 p.m. at St. James Anglican Church, 300 East Cordova St. That concert is free.

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