

The gift of song is in all of us

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Choir for 'everyone and every voice'



Vanessa Lindsay-Botten is a harpist, vocalist and pianist who believes that singing is everyone's birthright. (Peter Parsons/Staff)

Vanessa Lindsay-Botten sings the first few bars of the alto part to Sana Sananina. It's a Swahili song so the rhythm and lyrics are a little tricky for the choir of average Canadians gathered in the expansive nave of All Saints Cathedral.

"It's a really singable line," Lindsay-Botten tells them cheerfully. "I know it's new but it's going to sing itself for you."

She gives the opening note again in her clear round voice. "There's your pitch. If you can match it, that's great."

The eight altos give it a try. Their first attempts are a little rough. Some of the singers pick up the part right away but others tentatively follow the sheet music with their fingers. A few are clearly just hoping their neighbour knows how it goes.

But that's fine. Relying on each other is what You Gotta Sing Chorus is all about.

“It was really important for me to create a space that welcomed everyone and every voice,” Lindsay-Botten explained earlier. “So many people have been diminished somehow in the past. They’ve been told they can’t sing or asked to ‘mouth the words.’ Hearing that makes me sad and a little angry. You shouldn’t deny yourself the pleasure of singing just because you’re not professionally trained. If you can sing Happy Birthday, you’re a singer.”

Lindsay-Botten, a professionally trained singer herself, was inspired to create an inclusive chorus in Halifax after hearing about the Ubuntu Choir Network.

Named after a Bantu word meaning “I am because we are,” Ubuntu choirs are non-auditioned, community-focused and socially-engaged. They’re open to people of all faiths, cultures and abilities.

After work-shopping the idea, Lindsay-Botten created You Gotta Sing last summer. Now with over 50 members in several chapters, the choir has a wide repertoire of “accessible but musically interesting” pieces ranging from Latin chants to South African freedom songs to works by Coldplay and Serena Ryder. The music is fun to perform for both experienced singers and those just figuring out how to match pitch.

Sana Sananina, the African song the singers are working on this night, is starting to come together. The altos have decided to sing in a circle so as not to be led astray by the others. A woman named Mary leaves the tenors to help out the two-man bass section. Someone explains to a neighbour that “the little black hat” on the sheet music means a two-beat rest.

There’s never a wrong note here. It’s all part of the process. When things go a little off, Lindsay-Botten reminds everyone that, “It’s much more exciting to see a choir sing with animation than sing perfectly.”

And she’s right. The altos turn to face the front and the You Gotta Sing Chorus sings Sana Sananina one last time. Maybe not every single person hits the exact right note but it doesn’t matter. They sound fabulous.

Vicki Grant is a screenwriter and the author of 12 young adult novels. Her website is www.vickigrant.com.

CONCERT DETAILS

June 22, 2012 7 p.m.

Cathedral Church of All Saints – 1330 Martello St.

\$15 suggested donation (\$20/family)

Profits will be donated to Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign – the Stephen Lewis Foundation