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Arts & Entertainment

Choristers celebrates 35th anniversary

By **STEPHANIE THIESSEN**
The Champion

When Judy Hunter gathered nine women in her living room with the hope of forming a choir, she had no idea she was creating what would one day become an important piece of Milton's history.

On that evening in 1967, she just knew she was among kindred spirits — women who loved music as much as she did.

They soon deemed themselves the Milton Chansonettes.

"The idea that it (the choir) would still be going is something that I didn't conceive at the time," Ms Hunter said.

More than three decades and one name change later, the now Milton Choristers has grown to include about 40 singers who, like the women who paved their way, simply love to sing.

For the past five months, the Milton



File photo by GRAHAM PAINE

The Milton Choristers belt out a tune during one of their many concerts.

Choristers has been gearing up to celebrate its 35th anniversary with two celebration concerts May 30 at the Mississauga Living Arts Centre. 'Out of the Ordinary' will be performed by the Choristers at 2 p.m. and again at 7 p.m.

The concert will feature popular opera choruses and the Milton Choristers will be joined by the Georgetown Bach Chorale and Milton's own Women of Note ensemble. The combined group of more than 60 singers will be accompanied by pianist John Godevas.

The program will include special performances by soloists Deanna Sarkar and tenor Chris Fischer, as well as past conductors including Ms Hunter, who will also sing with the Choristers.

Classical opera choruses from Puccini, Verdi and Mozart will be among the selections, as well as excerpts from Gilbert and Sullivan.

Tickets cost \$23 for adults, \$20 for students and seniors and \$16 for children.

Ms Hunter said when she first moved to Milton, it was clear a choir was needed.

"When I moved here in 1966, I felt like it was a desert. There was nothing going on here culturally," Ms Hunter said. "So people said to me, 'You'll just have to start your own (choir).'"

Some major changes have taken place in

the past 35 years, notably the addition of men to the choir, which happened in 1978 — also the year the choir's name changed.

Ms Hunter said a number of men from the community had joined the Milton Chansonettes for a Christmas choir and before long were a permanent fixture.

"We made three records and performed three concerts a year," said Ms Hunter, who still resides in Milton. "At that time, the town was small, so we were the main source of entertainment."

Ms Hunter directed the choir for 15 years before she decided the choir was ready for new leadership to bring a fresh style and perspective. And so the baton was passed.

"After 15 years of directing, I thought they were ready to expand the horizons of their musical knowledge."

Time has flown since starting the choir, Ms Hunter said. "We celebrated at 10 (years), 25 and here we are at 35."

Good leadership, Ms Hunter said, is what she attributes the longevity of the group to.

Sonja van de Hoef, the current conductor/artistic director of the Milton Choristers, said the May 30 gala concert will be a tribute to the past as well as a glance at what lies ahead.

"The Milton Choristers are one of the oldest surviving choirs in Ontario," Ms van de Hoef said, adding, "That's quite an accomplishment for a community choir."

She said much of the music that will be performed at the concert will be familiar to people. "The concert covers all the bases. As you look at the repertoire, you'll see how opera has developed over the years."

In her second season with the Choristers, Ms van de Hoef — who is also the director of music at Knox Presbyterian Church — said one of the choir's strengths is its willingness to tackle new challenges.


"Their wonderful enthusiasm comes through," she said. "They always strive to take the next level."

Another of the choir's strengths, she said, is its unity. Instead of serving as a difficulty, the wide range of ages and skill levels in the choir is an asset. "I think people don't realize the wealth of arts in Milton."

Tickets can be purchased by calling the Living Arts Centre box office at (905) 306-6000 or 1-888-805-888 or by visiting www.livingarts.on.ca.

Tickets are also available at Delacourt's, at the corner of Main and Martin streets, and at Lewiscraft at Milton Mall. You can also call (905) 876-3203 or visit www.miltonchoristers.com.

Stephanie Thiessen can be reached at sthiessen@miltoncanadianchampion.com.



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