

ETCETERA

Women in harmony

BY AMY WEST
Staff Writer

The year was 1945. The Second World War was drawing to an end and women around the world were looking ahead to brighter days. In America, they found comfort and solidarity in music. The women of Tulsa, Okla. had caught on to what the men had been singing – the four-part vocal harmony known as barbershop. And following the “anything they can do we can do, too” philosophy, these women started the first chapter of Sweet Adelines International.

Today, Sweet Adelines International is a worldwide organization comprised of more than 30,000 women. Their motto is: “Harmonize the World”. Member countries include Canada, the United States, Australia, England, Finland, Germany, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden and the Netherlands.

Barbershop finally made its way to York Region in 1970. Under the direction of Dave McCaffrey, the York Highlands Chorus chapter of Sweet Adelines International rehearsed out of the Factory Theatre in Aurora. Then, five years ago, the Town of Newmarket offered the Old Fire Hall on Main Street as a permanent home for the singers of the York Highlands Chorus.

*It was more than just a sound —
it was a feeling.*

The chorus is made up of women from all walks of life.

“We have veterinarians, teachers, nurses and homemakers,” says current director Carol Appleton. “We are all very different but we all share a common love of music.”

Appleton, who studied piano at the Royal Conservatory of Music, has been a member of the York Highlands Chorus for 21 years and its director for the past 11. She heard about the chorus from a friend who heard her singing at a corn roast.

“She told me that I should go and listen

to these women sing and when I did, the sound just overwhelmed me.”

For Appleton, the chorus became an important part of her life.

“I had cancer at the time and being a part of the chorus helped me through it by giving me something to focus on. I don't think I would have made it through otherwise.”

Members come to the chorus in a variety of ways and from a variety of musical backgrounds. Fran Lunshof, who sang in youth choirs as a teenager, responded to an ad in the newspaper. Cheryl Yaciuk saw the chorus on Aurora cable and attended an audition.

“Barbershop was not my first choice,” explains Yaciuk. “My background is in opera but when I heard the chorus sing, it just floored me. It was more than just a sound — it was a feeling.”

That “feeling” drew Yaciuk and many other women to join the chorus, which now numbers 108 — four of whom are charter members who have been with the chorus since its inception.

The group practises for three hours every Tuesday night, studying everything from voice training to choreography. Guest speakers such as internationally renowned choreographer Erin Howden and vocal coach Jim Casey from Texas are brought in to lend their skills to the singers.

“Education is a big part of what we do,” explains Carol Appleton. “We hold a music school in the fall for members, quartet workshops in the summer and all year long we work on vocal and performance techniques.”

In addition, the Sweet Adelines International organization offers certification in choral directing, music arranging, judging and teaching. Through their “Young Women in Harmony” program, Sweet Adeline members share their joy of music with women in junior high through to college by developing programs with school

music staff.

Once a year, the regional champions representing Sweet Adelines International choruses and quartets from around the world gather for the international convention.

Apart from providing an opportunity to develop and showcase members' talent, the York Highlands Chorus gives the women a chance to be active in the community. They perform 12 to 14 concerts a year for local charities and service clubs, raising money for organizations such as the Aurora and Newmarket food banks, the Yellow Brick House, the Heart & Stroke Foundation and the Children's Wish Foundation.

hear the chorus sing a selection of tunes, from gospel to contemporary.

“The purpose of the open house is to raise community awareness,” says Yaciuk. “We just want people to know who we are. And we always welcome new members.”

Becoming a member of the York Highlands Chorus requires an audition process that spans about four weeks. Sheet music and practice tapes will be available at the open house. After mentoring with a section leader from the chorus, potential members are invited to audition with a quartet.

As the size of the chorus grows, so does the calibre of music. At last year's international convention, the York Highlands Chorus placed second in their division. This year they are hoping for top honours.

“We've been working on improving the quality of the product,” says member Nancy Elliott. “And we're also trying to get more competing quartets.”

Newmarket currently has two quartets at the competitive level. Moonlight Express are Novice Quartet winners and Hearts on Fire are ranked in the top 10.

There will be many chances over the next few months to hear the harmonious sounds of the York Highlands Chorus. On Dec. 2 and 3 they will be performing at St. Andrews College in Aurora with proceeds going to area food banks.

On Jan. 13 at the Newmarket Theatre, the chorus presents Just Living, an evening of '50s music.

Whether you've had professional training or just like to sing in the shower, get acquainted with the York Highlands Chorus, enjoy the sound of choral music arranged in four-part harmony and join 30,000 other women in harmonizing the world.

If you'd like information on how to become a member of the York Highlands Chorus or would like to book a performance, you can call the Old Fire Hall at (905) 898-3326.

Lois Gilbert (left), Pat Scougall (centre front), Linda LaBine (back) and Nancy Elliott make up the Aura Lights Quartet. They are one of six quartets that perform with the York Highlands Chorus.



The next public appearance for the York Highlands Chorus will be Sept. 5 during their open house at the Old Fire House at 140 Main St. The public are invited to come out and



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