

MUSIC | KATONAH, N.Y.

The Sounds of the Season



Susan Farley for The New York Times

UPLIFTING Vince Peterson conducts the Charis Chamber Voices at First Presbyterian Church of Katonah.

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Katonah



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VINCE PETERSON, sounding authoritative beyond his boyish looks and 27 years, abruptly cut off the voices resonating throughout First Presbyterian Church of Katonah and sprang up from his stool at the grand piano.

“The problem here is not the notes,” he said somewhat sternly. “The problem here is not the ability to count. The problem here is not the listening.”

No, none of those were cause for concern as 21 choristers — 11 women and 10 men — navigated a tangle of thorny rhythms and lush dissonances.

Rather, the problem was anxiety.

“Oxygen helps,” Mr. Peterson said. “Everyone breathe together.”

With that, the Charis Chamber Voices collectively inhaled and exhaled for a few beats on a chilly Tuesday night, resembling nothing so much as a [yoga](#) class. On a nearby wall in the vaulted sanctuary, a banner adorned with an angel trumpeter proclaimed, “Glory to God in the highest.”

Releasing their final breath, the singers resumed their penultimate rehearsal of [Benjamin Britten](#)’s “Ceremony of Carols.” A collection of 11 movements based on Middle English texts from “The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems” by Gerald W. Bullett, the work was composed in 1942 as Britten returned by sea from the United States to England on a Swedish cargo ship that was forced to skirt U-boats along the way.

Today at 4 p.m., Charis (pronounced CAH-ris) will perform “A Ceremony of Carols” alongside Conrad Susa’s “Carols and Lullabies: Christmas in the Southwest,” a 1992 work in English and Spanish written as a companion to the Britten, at the Bedford Presbyterian Church on the Village Green. The concert, which also includes

traditional carols, will be repeated on Dec. 13 at 8 p.m. at the South Presbyterian Church in Dobbs Ferry.

“This being my inaugural season, I wanted to choose repertoire that would push the envelope for them but also satisfy the need that people have to hear this kind of music at the holiday time,” said Mr. Peterson, who has conducted the choir since September.

Mr. Peterson may be new to the Charis fold, but already he is beguiled by the ensemble’s fearless approach to unfamiliar works and its clear, rich sound.

The by-audition choir, founded by Susanne Peck in 1994, is “technically amateur,” said Cynthia Jaffee, the board president, because they don’t get paid. But, she said, “education-wise and in terms of musicality, I’d say we would be professional.”

“They’re devoted, no question about it,” Mr. Peterson said of the members, who range from their 30s through retirement age, and commute from the far reaches of Westchester.

“It’s well worth it,” he said of his own 45-minute train ride from New York City, where he is the music director for the Loyola School in Manhattan and the Union Church of Bay Ridge in Brooklyn. A graduate in composition from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Mr. Peterson earned a double master’s degree in composition and choral conducting from Mannes College the New School for Music in Manhattan. He has tickled the ivories at Don’t Tell Mama, the Hell’s Kitchen cabaret, and recently founded Choral Chameleon, a 16-member chamber choir based in Manhattan.

“David and I have both sung in professional situations,” said Deborah Chodoff, a soprano and book artist who in 1997 joined the choir with her husband, a baritone and an editor with McGraw-Hill. “But it’s wonderful to be an amateur in the true sense of the word, to do something simply because you love it. And it’s very satisfying to be part of a group that wants to create something of high quality.”

Sure, members — the newest of whom joined about three years ago, and some of whom go back to the choir's inception — enjoy the social aspects, Ms. Chodoff said. But that is not the primary motivation for year-round, three-hour rehearsals.

“It feels good physically to breathe and sing, to make chords sound in tune,” she said. “In a chorus, you have to blend your voice with others. You can't sing the way you'd sing in a shower. It requires a special kind of cooperation.”

But even more satisfying can be the reactions of listeners.

“You hear an audience member say, ‘I was blown away,’ ” Ms. Jaffee said, “and it's just the most rewarding feeling because you touched somebody.”

That is one of the reasons, Mr. Peterson said, that he does what he does. “Somebody has a change of heart because of what they hear,” he said. “That's what we're out to do: to change hearts and, of course, make the world a little bit better using this as the vehicle to do it.”

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