

ARTS FEATURE

Sandlapper Singers Hint at Ambitious Future With Finale Concert Featuring Z. Randall Stroope

Lifting Voices

by Kyle Petersen Apr 26, 2017 Updated 11 hrs ago



Z. Randall Stroope conducts at the Rome Choral Festival.

The launching of a new season for the Sandlapper Singers, Columbia's long-running auditioned, semi-professional choir, is never particularly fraught. But there was a tingle of anticipation this year, the first led by new artistic director Dustin Ousley, particularly with the announcement of the closing program led by Z. Randall Stroope, a world-renowned choral composer and director, that would exclusively feature Stroope's compositions.

The move appears to mark a new level of ambition for the Singers, both in terms of artistic curation and marquee value. Stroope has an impressive, globe-spanning resume and is one of the best-selling contemporary choral composers around, having moved more than 3 million copies of some of his shorter pieces while also producing ambitious extended works like *Hodie! (This Day)* for mixed chorus, brass, organ and percussion, which the Singers will be tackling.

Stroope himself speaks in relatively measured terms about his success, preferring to talk in more general terms about the art form itself or the collaborative process of bringing a concert to life.

"I'd like to say that rising to prominence is that you're just writing music that you identify with and is honest coming from you," he admits. "We're fortunate sometimes when it's attractive to a wide variety of people across the globe. What I have done, which is a little different than most of my colleagues, is to try and write for really every segment of the population relative to age and difficulty. So you're really not just writing for the professional choirs, or not just writing for the elementary school choirs, but you're really comfortable writing for a pretty wide group. I think that's part of being more well-known."

It's exactly this diversity and range that makes him a good fit for a choral group trying to test new waters. This concert, which will be performed twice this week, features special guest musicians, as well as the Masters Youth Choir, an ensemble of select high school singers from around the region, swelling the size of the group to over 100 voices.

Stroope loves the mix-and-match approach of bringing younger and more professional voices together.

"I love [choral music] because it's very democratic — everybody can participate. You don't have to have the money to buy an instrument, you don't even have to take lessons even," he says. "A lot of people are very naturally gifted singers, so it's really a wonderful art form for the masses."

And as much as a concert of solely his works might seem like a chance to exact his own particular artistic vision, Stroope demurs at the thought.

"The neat thing about music in general is that the composer is just one of the many parts of this machine," he offers. "You have to have a poet, unless you write your own text, and a performing group, which I always say sonically resurrects what's on the paper. Until that moment it's just ink and paper. And then you have to have an audience that listens to it, perceives it, and then identifies with it. And I really enjoy being part of that process. It's more like a colleague or team member rather than being in total control of the product."

The composer speaks in glowing terms about working with the Sandlapper Singers and Ousley, though, noting that the all-Stroope program is one they assembled together.

"They are wonderful singers there and [we] have really put together a musical fabric that makes sense," Stroope says. "It flows well, is audience-friendly and highlights the singers. And they've been incredibly responsive."

If nothing else, this program also figures to be a primer for a new direction for the Sandlapper Singers under Ousley's leadership, too.

"Our goal as a choir is both to celebrate American choral music and to inspire the next generation of ensemble singers," the artistic director declares in a press release announcing the finale concert. "I can think of no better way to achieve this mission."

What: The Sandlapper Singers with Z. Randall Stroope and special guests

When: Friday, Apr. 29 (Eastminster Presbyterian Church, 3200 Trenholm Rd.) and Saturday, Apr. 30 (Union United Methodist Church, 7582 Woodrow St.) at 7:30 p.m.

Price: \$15 (\$5 with student ID)

More: sandlappersingers.org