Local director builds song bridge to Estonia

When Lonnie Cline heard the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir sing in 1993, the music spoke to him, and he was hooked.

Now Cline, the conductor and artistic director of the Unistus Chamber Choir, invites members of the community to get equally hooked on the music and, at the same time, say bon voyage to the choir as they prepare to attend Laulupidu in Tallinn, Estonia, in early July.

Unistus will present the 2014 Estonian Tour Concert at 3 p.m. on Sunday, June 15, at Milwaukie Lutheran Church, 3810 S.E. Lake Road. A $10 donation will help defray travel costs for the group.

The concert will feature a sampling of what the group will sing in Estonia, along with a smattering of other pieces, Cline said.

“This is our way of saying thank you to the Portland Estonians and all the donors who helped us,” he said.

He added, “People who love choral music should attend. This music is intended to make them think about the future possibility of peace and understanding.”

Tulehoidjad, a group of Portland Estonian dancers, also will perform at the concert.

Colossal song fest

The word Laulupidu means song festival in Estonian, and the event, held every five years, is the largest event of its kind in the world, Cline said.

How big is it?

“Close to 70,000 singers auditioned and 25,000 to 30,000 were chosen. Picture Providence Park with 20,000 seats — that is the choir, and they are performing in an arena that is 10 times the size of the Hollywood Bowl. There are half a million people in the audience, so when you are in the choir, you can see people almost to the horizon,” he said.

Cline added that the singing culture is so strong in Estonia, a country in the Baltic region of northern Europe, that in a population of 1.5 million people, one out of every two sings in a choir, and whoever is left over is in a dance group.

Laulupidu takes place on July 4, 5 and 6, in Tallinn, which has a Friendship City relationship with Portland, and all the music is sung in Estonian, mostly without accompaniment.

After two days of intensive rehearsals, the 25 members of Unistus will perform in four singing ensembles during the event, including the general choir, a select choir and a female and male choir.

Before Laulupidu, the group will participate in a concert and cultural exchange tour, performing in churches and other venues throughout Estonia, Cline said.

Singing to freedom

This marks Cline’s fourth time participating in Laulupidu with Unistus.
He formed the group in 1999, and in 2000 they began rehearsing together at the Niemeyer Center at Clackamas Community College, where Cline was the conductor of classical and choral music for 33 years. He retired from CCC in 2013.

There are 30 members in Unistus, and at least 75 percent of them are former CCC students. The other 25 percent come from the community, and they auditioned to be part of the choir. The group has performed all over the Portland metro area and beyond, Cline said.

The word unistus means fantasy or daydream in Estonian, and Cline chose it because in 1991 the Estonian people literally sang themselves to freedom from Soviet Russia.

In that year, Soviet tanks attempted to stop the progress toward independence, but people, singing forbidden Estonian patriotic songs, acted as human shields to protect radio and TV stations from the Soviet tanks. The tanks turned back, and Estonians were able to realize their dream of freedom without any bloodshed, Cline said.

“They were ordered to stop singing, but they did not, and their peaceful singing led to a resolution of conflict, and we want to carry that forward in our own group and repay Estonia for opening our eyes to that,” he said.

In fact, the mission statement for the Unistus Chamber Choir is to “exemplify peaceful solutions to prejudice, bigotry, greed, hatred and violence through the art of singing.”

Cline encourages members of the community to come to the 2014 Estonian Tour Concert to hear “singers who are trying to say love one another, and who want to confirm their belief in the goodness of people through performing music.”

**Sing for peace**

What: Clackamas County’s Unistus Chamber Choir presents its 2014 Estonian Tour Concert

When: 3 p.m. Sunday, June 15

Where: Milwaukie Lutheran Church, 3810 S.E. Lake Road

Details: A $10 donation will help defray the choir's travel expenses as they travel to Estonia on a concert and cultural exchange tour June 25 through July 8. They will perform at Laulupidu in Tallinn, Estonia, on July 5, 6 and 7.
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