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Chamber singers kick it up a notch

Weekend concerts let group show selections for upcoming conference

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Think of it as a selection of high notes — figuratively, at least.

When the Lanier Chamber Singers take to the front of Grace Episcopal Church in Gainesville this weekend, the ensemble of talented singers will be pushed to the top of their game with every selection. That's because the concert is a preview of what the group will be singing in a few weeks at the American Choral Directors Association's Southern Division conference next month.

And because the Lanier Chamber Singers will be performing in front of the group's peers — and, because the group is the only community choir invited to perform — Director Michelle Roueché said this concert is basically a selection of the chorus' highlights.

"This is the Gainesville premiere of the concert we've been invited to do there," she said, adding that the selections show "as much variety as possible, to show off how much power we have, how much soul we have."

Some pieces show off the group's soprano section, while others show off the bass section. The concert includes selections such as "Lux Aeterna" by Edwin Fissinger, "The Blue Bird" by C.V. Stanford, Beethoven's "Spring Sonata, Op. 24" (first movement) and "My God is a Rock," a traditional hymn arranged by Damon Dandridge.

Audiences will also get to hear guest artist Edward Pleasant, an accomplished singer and longtime friend of Roueché. Pleasant will solo on "My God is a Rock," lending his baritone to a song that requires feeling and an understanding of history when it's sung.

"It comes to my experience — the African-American experience — and Michelle wanted someone to bring that to it," he said.

A soloist with the Moses Hogan Chorale, the New York-based singer is featured on several CDs and has sung for both opera and musical theater. He's traveled the world with his voice, but he added that he's honored to be a part of the Lanier Chamber Singers.

"It's a fine ensemble, and it's definitely an honor to perform with them," Pleasant said. "They're just a jewel; a treasure in North Georgia."

Fellow singer Allen Baston, who drives from the Atlanta area to be a part of the Lanier chamber Singers, said he's not nervous about the upcoming performance in Memphis. Rather, he's excited, and said he's looking forward to singing "Lux Aeterna" in particular.

"I think it's the most challenging piece on the program, but it touches your heart when it talks about light eternal," he said.

When paired with the other selections on the program, Roueché said it's a chance for the singers to bring their A game to not only a Gainesville concert, but also to a show for their peers in Memphis.

"It's a tough crowd," she said of the conference attendees who will hear this weekend's program on March 12. "It's as if the crowd at the Olympics was all the athletes that didn't make it into the competition."

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