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Hitting the Right Chord

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Hitting the right chord



Anna Song glances at her watch. It's 3:10 on a Sunday afternoon and she has a schedule to keep.

"Okay, come on up and let's see if we can put it together," Song says.

Students dressed in black formal wear practice walking on and off stage, passing choir

folders to the front row, bowing. A girl kicks off her heels, her feet already sore. This is final dress rehearsal. In less than an hour, they will be singing before an audience.

"After you finish your solo, slowly move back into place instead of turning around," Song advises a student. She knows the importance of addressing each step so vocalists can focus on the ultimate task – performing well. By 3:40 p.m., as audience members begin finding their seats, choir members are tucked away in a room downstairs, stretching arms and legs, adjusting bow ties and fixing hair.

Then it is time. They take the stage. Song steps to the front, raises her arms in the air and the concert begins.

This is how it culminates. But the preparation begins months before for the Linfield Concert Choir.

Rehearsals: practice makes perfect

A recording of Gabriel Faure's "Requiem" plays loudly as members of the Linfield Concert Choir drop their backpacks and take seats in Delkin Recital Hall, arranging themselves according to musical section.

"I want you to hear how it should sound, to get a sense of the orchestra," says the aptly named Song, assistant professor of music and choral director. Pencils in hand, students take out their music and follow along. Some make notations and others mouth the words.

Next, it's the students' turn. "How about from 21? Gentlemen, on your note. Can I get a G?" Students are focused and still.

"To my ear it sounds a little weak – like a plant that needs water," Song says with a smile. They try the section again, with noticeable improvement. "H₂O, woo hoo!" everyone laughs.

The Linfield Concert Choir is the cornerstone of the college's choral program. It has 34 voices, comprising music majors and non-majors alike. The oldest group of its type in the Pacific Northwest, it is built on a legacy begun by professors emeriti Marion van Dyk and Larry Marsh. Three smaller Linfield groups round out the choral program – the Jazz Choir, the Women's Vocal Ensemble and the Wildcats Men's Glee Club. Each music group is a one-credit class. The concert choir meets four days each week, in addition to practicing in smaller sectional groups of bass, tenors, altos and sopranos. The groups generally perform "off-book," without music.

"It's a lot of work to memorize, but it pays off because you're not looking at music," said Jeremy Moll '12, a music major who plans a career in music. "You're really there, present, focused, communicating the song – it's effective that way."

Finding her calling

Song was a new mother in 2008 when she arrived at Linfield as interim choral director. She was caught off-guard by the tremendous connection between students, staff and the campus.

"There's something about the students who are drawn to Linfield," said Song, petite with dark hair and a soothing voice. "Working with them is really a joy. I feel like I've found my calling."

As a performer, Song is a founding member of In Mulieribus, a professional women's ensemble, but has found her niche in teaching.

"There's something about helping others discover that same passion and hone their skills that you don't get when you're performing," she said. "Pushing students to discover things about themselves and their abilities they didn't realize is beautiful."

Initially a political science major at UCLA, Song took her first music class in college and was hooked, eventually earning a master's in music at Yale. "I truly followed my heart and knew that somehow music would be a part of my career," she said.

With a firm belief that choir has the potential to teach about life, Song has bolstered the Linfield choral program and worked to raise the exposure of the groups.

Choir members sing at local events, work with various high school and college groups, host a music camp for local elementary students, perform flash mobs and present an annual Spring Break Choir Tour.

Each activity strengthens the bond among choir members, which translates to a more cohesive musical performance. But students also learn the impact music has on listeners.

“We’ve recognized what we can do with music,” said Brynn Hurdus ’11, alto section leader and choir board president. “Our final spring break concert was at a correction facility, and it was incredible to see how we touched them. They were crying and very appreciative.”

“We’re all here because we love what we’re doing and we want to share that with people,” said Moll.

A strong mutual respect between Song and her students is the basis for the program’s success, according to Richard Bourassa, professor of music. “Anna sets high expectations and the students meet them,” he said. And students agree.

“She pushes us very hard and it’s wonderful,” Hurdus said. “She’s very driven but she also connects with every one of us on a personal level. It’s a friendship we have with her, but also a very deep respect for her as a choir director.”

For her part, Song hopes to inspire her students rather than “direct” them.

“Music on paper is just notes,” she said. “It’s not real until it’s being done in time. I hope I offer my students a safe place where they feel trusted and a director who believes in them. When the students are there with you, committed to the beauty of the music and the words they’re singing, it’s palpable.”

And that is music to the ear for Linfield listeners. Watch a video at jeremymoll.com/posts/435 or view a photo slideshow at www.linfield.edu/photogallery.

– Laura Davis



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