

The Festival of Women in the Arts Returns for Second Outing

By Martha Horton

A remarkable variety of events, performances and exhibits celebrating the talented women among us will take place in the Southern Tier during March, Women's History Month. A sampling of the artistic offerings under the umbrella of The Festival of Women in the Arts includes choral music and quilting, fiber arts and photography, paintings and poetry readings, belly dancing and a Blue Grass Mass.

A month-long celebration of women's artistic endeavors was not what Will Wickham had in mind two years ago when the Festival was launched. Wickham is Director of the Cantata Singers of Elmira, a venerable choral organization with about thirty members from the Southern Tier. The group sings primarily sacred or spiritual music, most often in church settings. They present three concerts a year, hiring instrumentalists and lead soloists as needed.

Wickham decided to expand the usual repertoire for a concert last March. To celebrate Women's History Month, he planned a program dedicated to works by female composers. The highlight of the program was *Missa Gaia* (Mass for the Earth) by noted contemporary American composer Libby Larsen. The performance was held in Hamilton Hall at Elmira College, which was the first college in the world to offer college education and university degrees to women.

The idea of including other organizations and events took hold. "There was a tremendous amount of interest from the community," Wickham recalls. "It expanded to become much larger than we had ever anticipated." Existing events and programs were given a feminine focus; new events were created on the theme. By the time the Festival calendar was complete, it listed twenty-one events, twelve collaborators, and twelve venues.

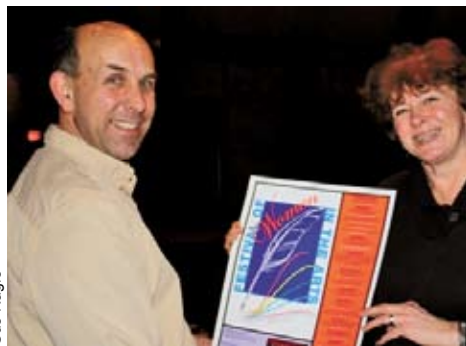
Creating and coordinating the Festival as well as raising the necessary funds consumed many hours by Wickham, the Cantata Singers, and a small committee. Their efforts were rewarded not only with community enthusiasm, but also with recognition from the Arts Council of the Southern Finger Lakes. The Council gave the Cantata Singers an Arts Partnership Award "for their successful efforts to bring together a collaboration of many venues to promote the Arts in a first-of-its-kind event for our area—the Festival of Women in the Arts—for Women's History Month, March 2008."

Given the enthusiasm with which the Festival was received, the Cantata Singers decided to repeat the event in

2009 and Cantata Singers Vice President Susan Nagle agreed to head the project. "I believe wholeheartedly that the Festival is an amazingly powerful expression of how collaboration and teamwork can benefit an entire community," says Nagle. "Without a doubt, the Cantata Singers were doing the right thing to give the Festival another run."

Wickham and Nagle set out this year to bring in wider representation of the arts, including drama and dance. A group of local women are producing a play, *Talking With* by Jane Martin, which combines seven monologues written and performed by women; another newcomer is a South African Song and Dance Workshop. Also new in 2009 is "A Spring Celebration of Women in Arts—Music and Dance" combining the local chapter of Crystal Chords, national award-winning women's barbershop singers; the Women's Chorale of 171 Cedar Arts Center from Corning; members of Elmira's Common Time choral group; the Boogie Woogie Girls trio from Watkins Glen; and the Mirage Belly Dancers of Ithaca.

Wickham was faced with the task of devising a 2009 choral program featuring women composers: "The *Missa Gaia* is a tough act to follow," he concedes. Wickham chanced to catch a performance of a new work on NPR, "The World Beloved: A Blue Grass Mass," by Minnesota composer Carol Barnett.



Sue Nagle

The Women's Festival in the Arts features dozens of different exhibitions, performances, and other events throughout the month of March. Among these are:

WHAT: "A Spring Celebration of Women in the Arts – Music and Dance" featuring Crystal Chords, The Women's Chorale of 171 Cedar, Members of Common Time Choral Group, Boogie Woogie Girls, and Morage Belly Dancers
WHEN: Sunday, March 8, 2 p.m.

WHERE: Cohen Middle School, 100 Robinwood Avenue, Elmira

WHAT: Women in the Arts Exhibit
WHEN: March 1–April 18, 8 a.m.– 5 p.m.; opening reception Friday March 6, 4–6pm
WHERE: CCC Academic and Workforce Development Center, 318 Madison Ave., Elmira

WHAT: The Blue Grass Mass
WHEN: Sunday, March 1, 3 p.m.
WHERE: Lake Street Presbyterian Church, 300 Lake Street, Elmira

For a complete listing of events, please go to www.cantatasingers.com.

Next Wickham set out to find bluegrass instrumentalists. Although determined to put together an all-female group of local players, he had to be content with a quintet of mostly women. The players are all local area residents, the majority of whom are connected with the local folk music association, Valley Folk.

Martha Horton is a first-time contributor to Mountain Home.



Sean V. Swert

Above: The Boogie Woogie Girls will channel The Andrews Sisters at the gala opening reception of the Festival of Women in the Arts, Saturday, February 28, 3 p.m. at Rural Research Laboratories, 254 Baldwin St, Elmira. Left: Will Wickham and Sue Nagle with the 2009 Women's Festival in the Arts poster.

KENT BROWN

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