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The first performance for Lehigh University's Choral Arts was held at Zoellner Arts Center on Oct. 22 and 23. The Lehigh Choral Arts is directed by professors Steven Sametz and Sun Min Lee. (Elouise Chen/ B&W Staff)

Lehigh University Choral Arts: instilling community and exciting audiences

BY CASEY BRAFF — ; PUBLISHED OCTOBER 27, 2022, 4:15 PM

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Lehigh University Choral Arts held its first performances of the year at Zoellner Arts Center. The group performed "Nänie" by Johannes Brahms, "Le tombeau de Couperin" by Maurice Ravel, "Gloria" by Francis Poulenc and the world premiere of Lehigh professor Steven Sametz's "Prayers."

The performances were held on Oct. 22 and 23.

According to the Choral Arts website, the group consists of over 200 singers from the Lehigh University Choir, the Glee Club, Dolce and Lehigh Choral Union. The choir is directed by Sametz and Sun Min Lee, a professor of choral arts.

Alaina Thompson, '26, is a member of the Lehigh University Choir and Dolce, Lehigh's all-women's treble ensemble. She is also a recipient of the Cutler-Sametz Choral Arts Scholarship, which is a four-year merit-based scholarship that includes a stipend and voice lessons.

To prepare for the performance, Thompson said the university choir practiced twice a week and rehearsed with the Choral Union, a group consisting of students and Bethlehem residents. Older Bethlehem residents and students alike performed with the Choral Arts group this weekend.

"It's really cool to see how (the older residents) are still making music at their age," Thompson said. "(It is) something that I hope to do when I'm older. Wherever I end up, I hope that there's a community choir around that I would love to join. It's really inspiring."

Sidney Jankanish, '23, assistant manager of the choir, said she loves singing with the Choral Union when all the pieces come together, but also noticed it is difficult to collaborate with a group that practices together so rarely.

Prior to the performances, the group had only practiced together twice.

Thompson said many students who participate in the choral arts program find both a sense of community and a calmness through music.

Richard Lin, '23, manager of Choral Arts, is in charge of coordinating communication between the directors, the executive board and performers in order to assure all tasks are being addressed by the appropriate parties.

Lin, who is also a member of the Glee Club and the University Choir, said performing and practicing is therapeutic.

"As someone who's done music for a good portion of their life, music is one of those things that really provides a release," Lin said. "It's an escape from the daily stresses of life where you can channel your energy and focus into something outside of what might be bothering you that day."

Thompson said she looks forward to choir practice each week because it allows her to take a break from everyday life.

Jankanish said Choral Arts instills a sense of community for many students.

Jankanish is from Southern California and said the tight-knit choir community has provided her with comfort so far from home.

"The choir is my family," she said. "I know that sounds cringey but (with) being across the country without my actual family, they've stepped up and taken me in."

Baker Hall was full of Lehigh students, parents and community members alike to support the Choral Arts program at the performances.

The performance included Sametz's original piece, "Prayers." This was performed in four parts, each one performed separately by the University Choir, the Glee Club, Dolce and Lehigh Choral Arts.

Sametz is the Ronald J. Ulrich Professor of Music at Lehigh and the artistic director of the Princeton Singers Choir, based in Princeton, New Jersey.

Sametz said he always had an interest in comparative religion. His new composition is composed of Bengali poetry, English metaphysical poetry, Navajo prayer and ancient Buddhist texts.

Kailey Clifford, '26, attended one of the performances and said "Prayers" was one of the highlights of the performance. She said her previous participation in a chorus allowed her to especially value the performance.

Clifford applauded the variety of voices included in the choral arts group.

"It gave me a lot more appreciation for the singers and the band because I know this stuff takes a lot of work, and I think they did an incredible job," Clifford said. "I think it works really well to have a ton of different sounds and a ton of different voices and also a ton of different training and perspectives."

Going forward, Jankani and Lin said the Choral Arts program is touring internationally for the first time in four years, something almost no current members have experienced before.

Lin said he is looking forward to traveling with the group to Ireland in May 2023, which he said will impact the community and his last semester at Lehigh.

"(Touring) is always one of those chances where you can get to know the people that are around you," Lin said. "It's over a week of just traveling ... with an organization that you've really invested yourself into over the past year. (You're) really getting to showcase what the music that you've been working on all year has amounted to."

Lehigh University Choral Arts will hold its next performance, "Christmas Vespers," on Dec. 4 at the Packer Memorial Church.