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FEATURED

Headed to the Hall: Owings church choir to sing at famous Carnegie music venue

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Mar 22, 2022



Members of the Jesus the Good Shepherd Choir who will be performing at Carnegie Hall in New York are, in back row, music director Katie Evans, L Walsh, Aidan Davis, John Otranto, William Thayer and Lacy Pitman, and in front row, Kathy Gray, Martha Shiles, Sue Hardesty, Ann Marie Scarpino a Walsh.

PHOTO BY WILLIAM THAYER

An audition two years ago will finally come to fruition when 11 members from Jesus the Good Shepherd Catholic Church in Owings get a chance to sing at the renowned Carnegie Hall on March 27.

“Carnegie Hall is one of the most prestigious venues in the world, for both classical and popular music,” said Sue Hardesty of Huntingtown, who sings alto and has been a member of the choir for more than a decade. “To be able to step on a stage with such history will be exciting, magical and a privilege.”

The singers from Jesus the Good Shepherd are the only ones from Maryland and the only Archdiocese of Washington choir that was invited to perform at the 2 p.m. concert on Sunday.

“As a pastor, I have always loved church music since I was a child,” the Rev. Michael J. King of Jesus the Good Shepherd said. “Today, I am indeed proud that members of my parish choir have undertaken such an ambitious goal as to actively participate in this musical experience at Carnegie Hall. I am so happy for them. It truly will be a memory for a lifetime.”

Katie Evans, who is in her ninth year as director of music and liturgy at the church, submitted a recording of the choir to Distinguished Concerts International New York, which produces the concert, back in 2020.

The group was selected from submissions from across the United States and invited to the 2021 Carnegie Hall performance, but that was ultimately canceled due to the pandemic.

This will be the first large choral work that the company has produced at Carnegie Hall in more than two years.

“One of the important lessons from the pandemic is how important our own lived experiences are,” Evans said. “To not be able to travel over the last two years has been tough, but to not be able to sing was even worse. The choir members realize we cannot get back these lived experiences and we value them so much more as performers.”

The Jesus the Good Shepherd choir members will sing the Faure Requiem under the direction of guest conductor Erin Freeman, who is in residence at Virginia Commonwealth University and part of the Richmond Philharmonic Symphony and Chorus.

Gabriel Fauré composed the approximately 30-minute Requiem in D minor, Op. 48 in the late 1880s and eventually finished it in 1900.

The composition is extra special to the members of the Jesus the Good Shepherd choir, who sing it almost every November for the church’s annual All Souls Day Mass of Remembrance for fellow church members who have died in the past year.

“The Catholic church has always promoted the fine arts,” King said. “Music, of course, is no exception. In today’s world, it is vital for the church more than ever to promote classical, choral pieces which are, in fact, timeless.”

“It’s been a journey to get here, but it’s an exciting event and we hope to keep that memory going and try and remember what this music means to us,” Evans said. “And during COVID we remember even more all the people that have passed during this time.”

The choir members will perform the piece as part of a 100-voiced choir that will also feature James D. Wetzel on organ, California's Mater Dei High School Choir and director Jodi Reed.

“Our main thing is not really performing, it's worship,” Evans said. “So this is really stepping out of our comfort zone.”

There have been plenty of hoops to jump through as the performers had to provide proof of vaccination and booster shots. In addition, though the choir will be allowed to perform without masks, they were required during rehearsals.

Carnegie Hall additionally requires all audience members to wear masks and provide proof of vaccination. The venue also utilizes time-stamped entry tickets to promote social distancing.

Luckily, the performers were told they do not have to wear a mask while on stage, but backstage and for rehearsals masks are still required.

“After all these hoops [we have to jump through], it will still be worth it to say I have sung at Carnegie Hall,” said soprano Kathy Gray, who is a research nurse in Annapolis.

According to www.carnegiehall.org, the venue opened in 1891 and has “set the international standard for musical excellence as the aspirational destination for the world's finest artists.”

The six-story venue, which has three performance halls, has hosted performances by Tchaikovsky, Dvořák, George Gershwin, Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, Judy Garland, Bob Dylan and The Beatles.

The Jesus the Good Shepherd choir numbered about 15 to 20 before COVID-19, but there are fewer members now. Performers range in age from their 40s to their 70s.

“More than anything this isn’t really about the competition of getting in,” Evans said. “It’s more the learned experience and use what we have, and this might be the only time we can do this.”

Tickets range from \$20 to \$100.

For more information, go to www.carnegiehall.org/calendar/2022/03/27/distinguished-concerts-international-new-york-0200pm.

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Jesus the Good Shepherd choir members