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Jan 5, 2013



\$20.00

Christina Ryan, Calgary Herald
[Performers with VoiceScapes put on a show during a ProArts @ Noon Concert Series event last month. The ProArts Society offers free cultural performances during the lunch hour at Cathedral Church of the Redeemer.](#)

Culture for the people; Free shows feature everything from jazz to opera

Ruth Myles, Calgary Herald | 1003 words | Jan 5, 2013 | \$30.00

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SPOTLIGHT

The ProArts Society and the High Performance Rodeo present Le Caravan Dance Theatre and Freya Bjorg Olafson at noon on Wednesday at the Cathedral Church of the Redeemer.

There's a dog in a pink coat sitting on the aisle of a pew about five rows from the back of the Cathedral Church of the Redeemer. While sun streams through the stained-glass windows on the church's west side, a man in the last row leafs through a stack of newspapers. Another gentleman settles into his spot and promptly dozes off, only to awaken once the notes of Handel's Messiah begin to wash over the audience gathered in the expansive space.

Welcome to the ProArts @ Noon Concert Series, where everyone (Sophie the service-dog-in-training included) is welcome. Fifty Wednesdays a year, the ProArts Society presents a concert in the cathedral's main space, offering a "super eclectic" array of programming, from opera to flamenco dance, jazz to pipe organ.

"Our objective is to bring high-quality performing arts experiences to people downtown at no charge," says Damon Johnston, the society's artistic director. And with the current crunch on performing space, the series serves as an outlet for up-and-coming artists looking to bring their work to the public.

"I like to think that we fill a very important niche in that respect.

It's not highfalutin', with no tech or lighting. It's just a beautiful open space that is available," Johnston says. "We are providing a venue for all of these really wonderful artists who might otherwise be constricted in their presentations. It might better be called 'recitals.' They're 40 minutes long, without any theatrical trappings."

And while the artists are benefiting, the audience gets the best part of the deal. The performances are free to attend (although donations are appreciated, and collected in a small wicker basket on the welcome table in the vestibule).

The relaxed, welcoming atmosphere is obvious, from the warm "Hello" from the volunteers out front to the brown-bag policy that encourages people to bring their lunches to the shows. More than a few joggers have been known to pop in to take in a portion of a performance before heading back out on 7th Avenue to continue their runs.

"It's all about making people comfortable, dispelling some of the trappings that could be construed as barriers of people enjoying culture as part of their ongoing life. They can come and say, 'Gee, that jazz pianist was OK.' Many people have their first opera experience here. It's quite up close and personal, rather than the remove at the Jubilee. That's really an eye-opener."

At today's event, the seven performers are the debut singers for VoiceScapes' 2012 Sing-Along Messiah. They come from Calgary, but also Edmonton, Lacombe, Vulcan and Lethbridge. During their performance, the audience swells to about 80 or so. There's no shushing of babies, or dirty looks when people come in late, or leave early. The relaxed vibe extends to the after-show ambience. Audience members often approach the artists to chat about their performance, Johnston says.

Arts fixture Grant Reddick, actor and professor of drama at the U of C, is a founding board member of the ProArts Society and remains involved with the group.

"It's been a long, slow growth to get ourselves organized, to apply for charitable status, which gave us starting money from Alberta Lotteries," Reddick says.

The society operates on funding from municipal and provincial levels of government, as well as donations and involvement from a number of foundations. In 2012, slightly more than 3,200 patrons took in the ProArts-sponsored offerings, up from 2,700 the previous year.

"We've found that what happens is once someone comes down and finds quality of programming - and the price is right - the tendency is to want to come back." And it helps that "the cathedral sits in the artistic centre of the city," Reddick points out.

Johnston, who took over the artistic director position from Jeff Neufield about five years ago, intends to build on the ongoing success of the series in the coming year.

Drawing on established relationships with festivals such as the High Performance Rodeo, Afrikadey and the Calgary Folk Music Festival, in addition to schools such as the Mount Royal University Conservatory, the programming will continue to expand. (All of January's slate of performers are co-presented in partnership with the High Performance Rodeo.)

And Feb. 9 sees the first paid event, with Onalea Gilbertson performing Torch Songs From a Gypsy Van with some help from guests such as Rebecca Northan and Kris Demeanor. Last year was also the first ProArts paid performers, with about \$8,000 distributed in artists' fees.

"Last August, we presented the Lily String Quartet at three in the afternoon on a Sunday before they went on tour. We want to consider adjunct programming," Johnston says. He's also considering creating series of choral and jazz music, among others, and reaching out to the corporate world for sponsorship.

But that's a bit down the line. Today, after the performance, there's a small get-together in the vestibule of the church. Reddick's birthday falls over the holidays, so there's a song for him and cake for all.

Among those gathered are audience members Monica Truong and her family, including daughters Octavia, 4, and Unity, six months.

"We're always late," Truong confides with a smile, but they try to make the performance every week. In addition to the quality of the programming and the

fact that it's free, Truong comes because her family is made to feel welcome at the events. And when you're schlepping two small kids around, that in itself is worth celebrating.

"It makes it possible to experience culture with the kids. You don't feel like you're in the way when you have to take them out to the washroom or feed them. It's great to expose them to the different music."

WEEKEND EXCLUSIVE

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