

Musical journeys come together in Summer Chorale

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COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS



Fenton

Conductor and professor Dr. Kevin Fenton's story begins in Kenya, inside a plainly furnished room with linoleum floors and construction raging outside. Standing in a circle with the Nairobi Chamber Chorus and the Festival Singers of Florida, Fenton, Nairobi Director, Ken Wakia, and the singers were teary eyed at the conclusion of their performance of the South African hymn, "Ukuthula," as it united the groups through song.

The performance sparked Fenton's desire to continue bringing choirs together to inspire kinship and peace through music, leading him to complete a Fulbright Fellowship and create the annual worldwide "Voice for Peace" event.

His passion for connecting ensembles and conducting are at the foundation of the summer master's program. Fenton advises graduate students in leading and organizing the annual Summer Chorale performance, which will be presented this year in Ruby Diamond Concert Hall on Thursday, July 27.

"I'm always in awe of how often music continues to surprise me," says Fenton. "I believe that play is the most effective way to get people to learn and music itself is incredibly reinforcing. If you give people great performances and you have a positive attitude throughout the process they're probably going to be continuous singers."

Growing up in his own affirmative environment, Fenton sang with both his mother and father in their church's choir. Soon, he joined his school choir, as well as became a drum major in band with dreams of continuing as a conductor. He went on to attend Friends University in Wichita, Kansas, where he received a degree in vocal and instrumental music education.

Fenton earned his doctorate from Florida State University in choral conducting after pursuing his master's and interests in how choral settings can build character. Many of his tactics for cultivating a supportive learning environment stems from proactive teaching methods rather than reactive language. For example, in his teaching he'll use story or metaphors to connect with students, giving them vivid illustrations of how they could embody a certain piece of music instead of chastising an incorrect note.

"I believe the choir has a unique ability to build community," says Fenton. "No matter how you feel about people, when you're singing it all goes away. There's something about singing that's all encompassing, and I feel they really become one. For a moment it's all about the music and that makes them feel full and richer."

Fenton says that tours and events are one of the main reasons he joined choir in the first place. The tours he took in college left a huge impression on his path as an educator, as it proved to be one of the most unifying and inspiring aspects of the choral arts. In addition to his appointment in FSU's College of Music, Fenton directs FSU University Singers and the Chamber Choir, as well as established the Festival Singers of Florida — all with a focus on touring outside the state and around the world.

From the southeastern United States to Europe, Fenton and his students are well traveled. Memories, like performing in an unheated Cathedral in the dead of winter, being a part of the 500 year anniversary of Arecibo, Puerto Rico, and performing as far as China to teach "Ukuthula," have continued to inspire Fenton. Many of his past students have taken on his thinking towards choir, including past graduate students who use volunteering as a way of bringing their singers together.

"I always talk about the importance of service projects," says Fenton, who enjoys watching summer



KEVIN FENTON

Kevin Fenton, Hugh Floyd from Furman University, and the 2017 summer masters choral music education students

If you go

What: FSU Summer Chorale presented by Florida State University College of Music

When: 7:30 p.m., Thursday, July 27

Where: Ruby Diamond Concert Hall, 222 S Copeland St

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information call 850-644-3424 or visit <http://music.fsu.edu/>.

master's students bond with one another in six weeks. "At one festival started by my former students, you sing in the morning then you do a project in the area, such as singing in a retirement community or feeding people at food bank. They built team-ship within their own choir and create these connections."

This year, the Summer Chorale will give 14 of Fenton's current summer graduate conducting students a chance to direct a choir of 30 music majors. Meeting twice a week for rehearsals, Fenton guides the students through his philosophies of conducting. In one of Fenton's more recent books, "Foundations of World Conducting," he aims to demystify the art form with techniques in rhythmic gesture and nonsense syllables that help singers to understand the tone or color of a particular piece.

"A lot of people will meticulously over teach every phrase which can take away the spontaneity of the moment," explains Fenton. "I believe that you allow singers to display their musicianship by using gesture and responding to them. When they get fired up about a section and it seems to be working then your gesture can encourage and continue to support that."

Fenton is excited to have Dr. Hugh Floyd, a professor from Furman University, in residency to assist the students in conducting the Mozart pieces in the performance's repertoire. Newer composers will also be featured to create a diverse program that will challenge both the conductors and choir students according to Fenton.

In a recent rehearsal, Fenton told his conductors to share their musical journeys with the choir as a way of giving them insights into the professional music world. Like tours, it's yet another one of Fenton's



pillars in teaching — sharing and creating a "collective" narrative that unites the group in their goals and efforts both inside the classroom and on the stage.

"One of my graduate students came up to me afterwards and said, 'Dr. Fenton, we're all a part of your collective story,'" smiles Fenton. "I think the collective story is a big thing. It's better to hold hands and run up the hill together instead of climbing over each other. We need each other."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).

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