

Community choir raises spirits



The North Hastings Community Choir presents 'What did the Star See?' on Dec. 6 at the Bancroft Village Playhouse.
JIM EADIE Special to This Week

By Jim Eadie

Study after study quoted online note the clear connection between the presence of choral singing groups in a community, and an increased level of wellbeing, perceived happiness and health in that community, as well as increased levels of community social action and volunteering. That connection is not lost on Melissa Stephens, musical director of the North Hastings Community Choir, along with five other choirs in rural central Ontario.

On Dec. 5 and 6, the local choir brought all of their hard work since September to public performances at the Bancroft Village Playhouse in a presentation entitled: 'What did the Star See?'

Obviously very well rehearsed, the choir filled the Playhouse for two performances that included a broad cross-section of musical styles, new music, and even the opportunity for the audience to sing seasonal favourites along with them.

'We sang a collage of music with a common theme of stars,' said long-time choir member Tim Baragar. 'About 90 per cent of this music is new music to the choir, that we had never heard before. Sometimes you have heard a song thousands of times before, but it is nice to be able to say: Oh gee, that was beautiful, that's the first time I have heard that song!'

Choir members all expressed another common theme: admiration for musical teaching skills of Stephens, their director over the past several years.

'We work hard, but we have a lot of fun,' said Mabel McLellan, the last remaining charter member of the choir that was formed 22 years ago. 'Melissa makes us work hard, but has a great sense of humour! She is the ultimate musician - music seems to flow in her veins. She often reminds us that our pianist Rod Moffat is very special. Choirs don't often get an accompanist of that calibre.'

McLellan has belonged to choirs since she was in Grade 6, growing up in Toronto.

'I started singing at the Anglican Church junior choir on Sunday afternoons, and I would go to Sunday school in the morning at the Presbyterian Church.'

Stephens admitted that she chooses music that is challenging for the choir, but that she knows they can learn to sing well.

The reaction of the Friday night performance was unusual for the usually well-disciplined reputation of choral presentations. The audience came to their feet clapping, and calling for an encore, and the choir obliged with one more song.

As the curtain closed, the faces of the choristers told the whole story. Not only was the audience thrilled with the evening's music, but also the choir was very pleased with their performance.

New members are always welcome to the choir, according to Baragar, and it is not necessary to be able to read music to participate. Rehearsals are held Wednesday evenings at the L'Amable Bible Chapel.