

Ambassadors of Harmony

Note-perfect

Story by Robin Seaton Jefferson
Photo by Michael Schlueter

They come from as far away as Decatur and Springfield, IL and even Iowa City, IA to practice every Thursday evening in St. Charles. There are 243 of them...men of all ages...and they're absolutely amazing to listen to. Who are they?

They are the Ambassadors of Harmony.

The brochure says, "Fun for any guy who likes to sing." But Director Dr. Jim Henry says, "There's a long list of things that are unique about this chorus. It's a very specific sort of all-American music."

Henry is the head of the Choral Studies Department at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. He has a Ph.D. in Music Composition from Washington University in St. Louis. He sang bass with The Gas House Gang—the 1993 International Quartet Champions for many years and now sings bass with a new quartet—partnered with three other past gold medalists—Crossroads.

It was under Henry's direction that the performing chorus of the Ambassadors of Harmony won their 14th consecutive championship in the BHS (Barbershop Harmony Society) Central States District Chorus Competition on October 11, 2008 in Cedar Rapids, IA.

Singing such old favorites as "Love Walked In", "Get Me To The Church On Time" and "This Joint is Jumpin'", The Ambassadors have performed all over the world, from Ireland, Germany and England, to The Netherlands and Sweden.

They practice each Thursday evening at 7 p.m. at the Blanchette Memorial Hall in Blanchette Park in St. Charles. The public is welcome and there are always visitors watching. "There is just something about that many men singing with that kind of



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passion", says Dr. Henry.

So it's the music and fun that attracts them, but the brotherhood keeps them, Henry said.

The Ambassadors of Harmony is known for its family-oriented reputation. Henry remembers when his brother—also a member of the chorus—was dying of cancer. "This chorus was an unbelievable support system. Every need his family had, from grocery shopping to pulling up srumps, it was just covered. It was just done. That's why I say that the music attracts us but the fellowship keeps us."

Dr. David Wright, professor of mathematics at Washington University, is associate director of The Ambassadors and also one of the premiere songwriters and arrangers of

a cappella music for the group.

In July of 2004, The Ambassadors of Harmony won the BHS International Chorus Championship in Louisville, KY, singing two arrangements by David Wright and receiving a standing ovation for their gold medal performance. In July 2007, The Ambassadors achieved their highest competition scores ever in a first place tie with the Westminster Chorus at the Society's International Chorus Competition in Denver, CO. Per the Society's tie-breaking rules, The Ambassadors were awarded the second-place silver medal. Last year, the chorus again took the silver medal at the international competition in Nashville, TN, missing a win by three-tenths of a percentage point.

Henry said the 243-man Barber Shop chorus works at "an extremely high professional level, and yet the number of people who make a living in music that perform in this chorus" are fewer than the fingers on one of his hands. "They come from all walks of life and all ages and yet they make music at a level that's almost unheard of."

Ken Schroer is one of them. He remembers standing in front of his new house in St. Charles many years ago. A man he knew pulled up and saw him standing there. The man had some sheet music on the car seat next to him. He was a member of the then-Daniel Boone Chorus.

That was four decades ago. He is still involved with the chorus, which is now called The Ambassadors of Harmony. The chorus was formed in 1963 by 26 men in St. Charles. The chapter is

affiliated with the Barbershop Harmony Society (BHS) formerly known as the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America, Inc. (SPEBSQSA, Inc.). The society was formed in 1939.

The Ambassadors range in age from 9 to 85 years of age. Boys under 16 can join the chorus if their father or grandfather is a member. Schroer said The Ambassadors currently host about four sets of grandfather, father and son trios. About 151 men make up the performing chorus.

Each year, the Ambassadors of Harmony plans a season of events that includes a show in June, "Voices in Harmony", and a holiday show in December, "Sounds of the Season". For the past four years their performances have been at the Blanche Touhill Performing Arts Center at UMSL.

Quartets from the group also deliver singing valentines each year all around the St. Louis area.

The group's mission is simple: to give its audience a gift that they will always remember with a smile and to provide the very best in a cappella music.

Schroer said The Ambassadors' main goal is learning songs "note-perfect so the four-part harmony can be recognized and enhanced."

"This can really be a challenge," Schroer said. "The harmonics are above what we actually hear in any music. When the four-part harmony meets, there it is expanded sound. It's different from anything you'll ever hear in vocal production music or the church choir. Barber Shop has its own style. It is a unique art form and it takes a special arrangement to bring out the best of four-part harmony."

That four-part harmony is so blended that the listener is unable to distinguish between the individual singers of the bass, baritone, lead and tenor parts. "But they create what we call overtones above those voices," Henry said. That's what those in the business call the "ring". And it's sheer pleasure to the ear.

Schroer said The Ambassadors, and especially their directors, "know how to get the maximum ring out of any standing position." It's this "ring" that causes the expanded sound. "Unlike most other vocal arrangements, you can understand each word. We deal so much with vowel accuracy. It's a real science I'm taking part in."

"We call it 'singlish'", Henry said. "It's like English but we're really paying attention to all the sounds. The vowels are perfectly matched and the consonants are sung together."

The result leaves the listener unequivocally amazed and convinced there are instruments in accompaniment when there are not. But

the entertainment doesn't stop with the music. The choreography and the expressions on the faces of the hundreds of crooning entertainers leave the audience spellbound.

"We really change people's lives with our music," Schroer said. "We give gold medal moments to our audience."

Henry directs his friends and fellow music men each Thursday night with the same passion that each of them brings to the table. He tells the men, "You've heard it said that the devil is in the details. Well, I say that God is in the details...especially in any kind of exceptional art or beautiful music." He also gets extremely technical...insisting each man sing with ultimate resonance all the time. "Basses...get some raise in the soft pallet, Baritones...same deal, Leads...we're not in danger of being too sharp...let's have a G. That's where we live, Leads. Tenors, think about leading the sound."



Henry has created a clinic at UMSL for high school choir members that is sponsored and underwritten by The Ambassadors. Last year about 600 boys and their choir directors spent all day teaching songs in the Barber Shop style. They call it "A Capelloza" a play on the work a capella. This year, the group added a session for 500 girls, at the request of local choir teachers.

The Ambassadors of Harmony will present "Voices in Harmony—2009" on June 20, 2009, and the "Sounds of the Season" December 11-13 at the Touhill Performing Arts Center on the University of Missouri-St. Louis campus. Tickets are on sale now. For more show information, visit www.aoh.org.

The Ambassadors will be competing at the BHS International Convention in Anaheim, CA in July. ■