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"The formula is balance, diction and a wide range of color to the voice." – FRANK SCINTA



A small group with a superb sound: Vocalis members rehearse at the Blessed Sacrament Church.

Photos by Mark Muir/ Buffalo News

A HEAVENLY SOUND

Vocalis shows what a beautiful blend of unaccompanied human voices can sound like

By PAULA VOELL
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

About three years ago, Jamie Burritt asked his friend, mezzo soprano Quinn Patrick, to meet him at Spot Coffee. Settled in with their capuccinos, Burritt got to the point: "Who do you know?" Meaning - who are the area's highest quality singers?

"We just kind of threw some names around and I started writing them down," said Burritt, who wanted to form a chamber choir.

Aren't there enough local choral groups already?

Not quite. Not like the one he wanted.

His idea was to present a cappella music ranging from the Middle Ages to Billy Joel. Such things as: "Salve Nos, Domine" by Thomas Lupo, "Past Life Melodies" by Sarah Hopkins, and "Yesterday" by Lennon and McCartney.

He wanted a small group with a superb sound.

"I wanted a unique sound that's intimate enough to draw in the audience," said Burritt, who founded the 16-member Vocalis in 2002.

He's done it, according to Frank Scinta, who enjoys a reputation for excellence in a cappella groups locally. "The formula is balance, diction, a wide range of color to the voice and attention to phrasing and breathing," Scinta said. "This

group has all of that."

For a time, it even had Scinta's son, Christopher, a tenor for one season before he moved to Washington, D.C. "When we said goodbye, I told him we'd miss him," said Scinta. "And he said he'd miss Vocalis."

All about quality

From the beginning Vocalis has been about quality. Consider this: all of its members have jobs making music. They give private voice lessons, they direct choirs, they sing as paid church singers, they teach music.

Though they are young, most in their 20s and 30s, individuals bring a depth of knowledge along with the experience of singing in top-notch church choirs, college choruses, the city's best choral groups.

At Vocalis, they've found a sanctuary, a place to learn unfamiliar music, and an experience that's

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Vocalis members have discovered the power and wonder of the human voice.

'A chance like this doesn't come often'

VOCALIS • from C1

"good for the soul," they say.

Joining the group has given Dean Vallas, a bass, a chance to sing again and, also, to "not be in charge." "In school, the questions always are about where we are, what page we're on," said Vallas, who teaches at North Tonawanda High School. "Here, everybody knows."

When Vocalis gathers, not only is everyone on the same page, they hit notes at the same millisecond, they inhale and exhale together, they have the same intonation.

For Roger Griffiths, 25, singing with the choir presents a gratifying opportunity. "A chance like this doesn't come often with this caliber," said Griffiths, a bass soloist at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church.

For him, it's another in a chain of musical experiences that have come to define his life, he said. "When I was a kid, I was a big geek, without any friends," he said, "but a music teacher got me singing. I ceased to be a geek because it gave the nervous, twitchy kid something to be good at."

'I listened to myself'

It was three years ago when Jamie Burritt decided he was ready to settle somewhere. He'd graduated from Geneseo College, then the University of Maryland, where he got a masters of music degree in opera. Then, he became nomadic: Minneapolis, summers at Chautauqua, singing at Glimmerglass, in Portland, being a winner in the Stewart Operatic Voice Awards in Oklahoma City.

"I felt I needed to have a better balance," said Burritt, who was weary of the road life. He started driving to Washington, D.C., without specific plans, and got into



Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

Charles Wolter and Roger Griffiths, right, gather music.

Pennsylvania, "but it just didn't feel right."

He pulled off the road, he said, but when he tried to get back there wasn't a ramp going South, which Burritt took as a sign.

"I decided I wanted to be in the place I love," he said. "I finally listened to myself. I decided to make my way home."

Ambitious plans

From the first rehearsal, Burritt was pleased: "I was like — all right!"

He has ambitious plans: he'd like to get a Web site going; he wants to perform outside of Buffalo; he wants to build an audience base; he'd like to apply for grant money; he'd like to record a CD; he'd like to commission a piece for Vocalis.

"And, ideally, I'd love to pay everybody," he said. "They deserve it."

For now the immediate con-

cern is an upcoming concert and the next audition, scheduled for 7 p.m. June 15 at Blessed Sacrament. There's always the question of holding onto singers. This season, for example, they lost three tenors, all of whom moved out of the area.

"There's always a shortage of tenors," said Robert Pacillo, who wears red sneakers to rehearsal and teaches at Lockport North Park Middle School. "Either they are hiding or they've joined rock bands."

Besides the search for tenors, Burritt knows that he needs to set stricter guidelines about attending rehearsals. "I'd almost rather have a small group that's really committed than a larger group with four or five AWOL," he said. "I really have to be more of a tyrant, but I also have to keep in mind that this kind of personality is doing lots of things."

It's an escape

At a Wednesday night rehearsal in Blessed Sacrament Roman Catholic Church, Burritt plays a portable keyboard, encircled by singers, some in jeans, others wearing the music-teacher blazer, with their ethereal sound floating through a sanctuary that offers right-on acoustics.

Daniel Victoor, director of music ministry at St. Gregory the Great Roman Catholic Church in Amherst, who has sung opera in Edmonton and Montreal, says it's an escape, but an escape with purpose, a chance to make a significant contribution and a chance to learn new music.

As he listens to a new piece, Victoor says: "This is one of the hardest things we've done — it's just awful — you just have to trust that it's sounding right."

With the evening, and their energy winding down, Burritt

plays a few bars of "Home on the Range" to warm the choir up for "Open Then Mine Eyes."

Then he says: "Here we go — can we just run it."

When they've finished, he tells them: "We're tired by now, but it'll sound better later."

By 8:30 p.m., after the group has dispersed, Burritt leans against a church pew and admits: "Yeah, I'm pretty proud of this whole thing."

After a day of teaching at Immaculata Academy, then giving voice lessons at Buffalo State College, Burritt still hasn't had dinner. "I can't complain," said Burritt, who is 33. "I'm really, really tired now, but I like having a lot of things happen."

Near the top of that list, he said, is proving what a beautiful blend of unaccompanied human voices can sound like.

"What we want to do is present more than a concert," he said. "We want it to be an experience that you can take with you."

Vocalis will perform its last concert of the season, in a program of its favorite works, at 3 p.m. June 5 in Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, 1080 Main St. There is a suggested donation of \$10.

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