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Celebrating women

New Festival of Women in the Arts offers a month's worth of music, art and literature in Elmira.

By Jill Breedlove

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Will Wickham had a great idea, and others are running with it, much to his delight.

The Horseheads resident directs the Elmira-based Cantata Singers, a choral group with about 30 members from the Southern Tier that performs about three times a year. This year, they kick off their season and Women's History Month with a two-day event, March 1 and 2, with a program dedicated to female composers.

The opening concert, Saturday, March 1, at Park Church showcases Kathleen Shimeta, a New York singer who has devoted her life to studying and performing the works of pioneer American composer Gena Branscombe. The Sunday, March 2, performance at Elmira College's Hamilton Hall will feature the Cantata Singers and two soloists performing music of women from the medieval to contemporary period.

Wickham and four other members of the Cantata Singers -- Martha Horton, Felix Kapron and Stephen and Susan Nagle -- didn't stop there when they began organizing their event 10 months ago. They invited other area groups to celebrate women in the arts, too.

"We started talking to other artist groups, and it turned into this huge event. I have a feeling it's going to become an annual occasion," Susan Nagle said.

The debut event is called the Festival of Women in the Arts. It brings together a mix of new events and exhibits, along with recurring ones that fit the festival's theme or were already planned for Women's History Month. It will run from Feb. 26 to March 31 and include more than 20 events, nearly all free, from music to art to lectures. Among the venues are the Chemung Valley History Museum, Park Church and YWCA of Elmira and the Twin Tiers.

"After some snowball-like gathering of ideas and supporters, the Festival of Women in the Arts was officially born ... It seems that there is a tremendous amount of interest in this project in the community," Wickham said.

"It spread much larger than we had ever anticipated," said Dorothy Hoos, another member of the Cantata Singers.

The festival has its own logo, thanks to Wickham's brother, Fred Wickham, president of Howell, Liberatore and Wickham Inc. The Elmira company created two logos: one is a female figure made up of an artist brush and a musical clef, while the other is of a writing quill drawing a rainbow. The Cantata Singers chose to use both to represent both the "arts" and women's contribution to them.

Most of the musical performances will feature works composed by women and will be performed by women as soloists or in small groups.

There will be visual arts displays in two galleries at Elmira College, in three galleries at Rural Research Laboratories at the Arnot Art Museum and at the Community Arts of Elmira. These displays include paintings, drawings, fabric and video art as well as a vast array of collages, photography and sculpture, all by women.

Beginning March 6, there will be a series of lectures about the contributions of women in various fields at the Chemung Valley Historical Society, the Clemens Center and Elmira College. Also planned are a breakfast at the YWCA of Elmira and the Twin Tiers, a performance produced by the Thursday Morning Musicales, an exhibition at the Arnot Art Museum, a literary presentation by the Zonta Club, a poetry reading along with readings of other women's writings and a competition by the Friends of the Steele Memorial Library and informational displays of organizations that are members of the Chemung County Council of Women.

The first event will be a photography exhibit Feb. 26 at Elmira College, which was the first women's college in the country. Events will be held there in Hamilton Hall, the George Waters Gallery and the Gannett-Tripp Library.

The opening reception for the monthlong festival comes 5 to 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 29, at Rural Research Laboratories, 254 Baldwin St., Elmira, with a proclamation, music, refreshments.

What started out as a small music concert has turned into a huge festival celebrating all kinds of women's art. While the ARTS of the Southern Finger Lakes is providing a \$2,500 grant to the Cantata Singers for their part of the Festival of Women in the Arts, the overall event has become an expensive project. Funding for the festival has come from a variety of sources, including fundraisers, grants, corporation sponsorships, personal sponsorships and advertisements. However, more financial support is needed.

To volunteer in the festival or make a donation, contact any of the participating organizations, go to <http://www.cantatasingers.com/> or call Susan Nagle at (607) 732-8940.

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