

Christmas started in July for church music director

By Brian McElhiney

CAPITAL REGION – This summer, Julie Panke was already thinking about Christmas.

Panke, choir director for the First Reformed Church at 8 North Church St., Schenectady, attended a church music conference at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., this past July. It was here that she discovered Ben Allaway's "Sing, Angels, Kings and Folk," a piece that will be prominently featured in First Reformed's Christmas Eve Mass this year.

"Anton Armstrong ... directs the St. Olaf Choir, and he was the choir director at this conference," Panke said shortly before a recent choir rehearsal in preparation for First Reformed's Christmas celebrations. "This is the piece that he had us sing, and I really fell in love with it, so I was able to order it for this season and introduce it to my choir. So you might say I was thinking about Christmas in July."

Getting an early start on the Christmas season and the many church events that come with it, including Advent and Christmas Eve services and other caroling events, would make sense for a church choir. Although actual choir rehearsals for the holiday season don't begin until fall, the music is usually selected well in advance.

three major events

Steven Rosenberry, music director at St. Paul's Episcopal Church at 21 Hackett Boulevard in Albany, was also choosing Christmas music for his church's choir in July.

"It's basically all settled in July or August, long, long in advance," Rosenberry said. "I can tell you right now what we're going to be singing on Easter."

This year, St. Paul's is holding three major musical events leading up to Christmas. The first of these, A Service of Lessons and Carols for Advent, takes place Sunday morning, Dec. 5, at 10:30. A Messiah Sing Along, on Sunday, Dec. 12, at 2 p.m., will feature Handel's Messiah, Part 1, in its entirety, with the choir leading those in attendance. A traditional Christmas Eve service, at 7:30 p.m., will feature the choir singing four carols.

The choir will be introducing a different sound at the Advent service. Normally, Rosenberry accompanies the choir on organ, but one of the pieces, Donald Pearson's "Advent Procession," calls for hurdy-gurdy, drums, tambourine and violin.

"We often do have instruments, and this particular piece on Dec. 5 calls for special instruments," Rosenberry said. "It's kind of a medieval-type piece."

The choir began rehearsing pieces such as Franz Bibel's "Ave Maria" and Harold Darke's "Collegium Regale" at the beginning of November, and will continue rehearsing once a week all the way up until the Christmas Eve service. For the Messiah Sing Along, which costs \$10 for entry, the church has hired professional soloists Kara Cornell, Eugene Tobey, Andrew Truex and Vedrana Kalas to sing the Christmas arias.

AMBITIOUS performance

The First Reformed Church's volunteer choir is gearing up for a slew of events of their own, including a Christmas Eve performance that will be on a much larger scale than anything the choir has attempted in recent years. At 8:30 that evening, prior to the regular service, the choir will perform the Christmas cantata "We Sing the Birth" by David Williams, accompanied by the church's two hand bell choirs, the Klokken Ringers and the Tower Ringers, as well as oboe, flute, piano, organ and percussion.

"['We Sing the Birth'] was last done here I think in 1996, so I just found it in the library and thought it would be a nice work to put together," Panke said. "The tuning is going to be a challenge, because obviously you can't tune hand bells. You can tune the organ a little bit, but probably not extensively, so we'll have to try and get the piano to match as closely as we can."

Despite the expanded instrumental lineup, the choir has been rehearsing solely accompanied by organist Charlie Moose. A dress rehearsal the night before Christmas Eve will be the first time all of the musicians involved, including hired

instrumentalists flutist Jean Hayes and oboist Susan Gierthy, will be playing the piece as a whole.

“It’s challenging, but our accompanist, organist, is very adept at working in the instrumental lines so that we get them in our ear on the piano,” Panke said. “So by the time we put it all together, we won’t be too surprised by any.”

The First Reformed choir is also recording new music for the annual Living Nativity event, which will be held this year in the front church yard on Sunday, Dec. 19, at 5 p.m.

“They’ve been using a tape that was recorded many years ago when Dean Dykstra was ... the senior minister,” Panke said. “So they asked us to do a newer recording of the music.”

Festive beginning

The First Baptist Church of 202 Milton Ave. in Ballston Spa is preparing for a large Christmas celebration of its own, entitled Share the Light, on Friday, Dec. 3, at 7:30 p.m.

“The church has done that for quite a number of years – it used to be called the Victorian Christmas,” said music director Darryl Drew. “I guess Saratoga has its Victorian Christmas, and other places have that, so we kind of renamed that; we’re calling our program the Share the Light Christmas Celebration, kind of a festive beginning to the Advent season in the Christian church.”

The program will feature the church’s adult choir, women’s ensemble, men’s quartet and children’s choir presenting a program ranging from sing-along Christmas carols to more spiritual numbers.

“It basically starts off on the secular vein, and then gradually moves into the spiritual vein,” said music director Darryl Drew.

In addition to the Christmas Eve service at 6 p.m., and Share the Light, the First Baptist Church choir will also be inviting members of the Ballston Spa Community Christmas Choir to sing traditional carols for Hark the Herald, which takes place Sunday, Dec. 19, at 5 p.m.

“We’ve been working for two to three weeks – in some cases with the community choir, that’s been four weeks,” Drew said. “We feel as though it’s really important not only for the people in Ballston Spa to come to it, but it gives them the opportunity to see the church and find out what we’re all about.”