

Honor Choir Will Make Music Friday Night

By David Lias david.lias@plaintalk.net | Posted: Friday, August 5, 2016 12:00 am

Music and performing are, naturally, important parts of the 43rd annual Honor Choir, which will perform at 7:30 p.m. Friday in Aalfs Auditorium on the campus of the University of South Dakota.

Randy Stenson, the choir's guest conductor who has worked with the 142 South Dakota high school kids who make up the honor choir, however, talked about a component of this week's experience he feels is key.

"We want to good (music) literature, and we want to do it well, but more importantly, this should be something special for the young people who are participating," Stenson said. "These are special kids who spent so much time to prepare to come to this.

"They should have a great experience. The bond that they'll make with the other kids – that's the big thing. We'll make music together, and we become a little family for a week. That's the important thing."

Stenson, who is in his 36th year of teaching and has earned international recognition in choral education, said he knew he was on the right track earlier when one of the honor choir participants told him this week's experience has convinced him to become a choral director.

"We want to promote choral music because it is part of our soul; it's part of our humanity," he said. "There's so much crap in the world, and these kids get to come together and take us away from that. This is our future, and I want them to be able to leave here thinking that they did something really important, that they changed somebody's life, even if for a moment."

Stenson is currently the choral director at St. Mary's International School in Tokyo, Japan, where he directs the St. Mary's varsity ensemble, men's choir, international show choir, senior handbell choir, middle school choirs, and is the school-wide administrative fine arts coordinator.

He is also on the summer faculty of the International Choral Education Workshop in Los Angeles,



Rehearsing

Randy Stenson urges members of the South Dakota Honor Choir to have fun during Tuesday afternoon's rehearsal in the ballroom of the Muenster University Center. The choir performs Friday night in Aalfs Auditorium.

California.

Stenson received his master of music education degree from Vandercook College of Music and earned his bachelor's degree from Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Most honor choir experiences in other states, he said, last just a couple days. Stenson had nothing but praise for the weeklong experience offered to young vocalists in South Dakota, and the effectiveness of the program.

“The set-up here is really amazing. A lot of times, it's just me and an accompanist,” he said, describing his past experiences conducting honor choirs in other states. “But here they have section leaders, they have counselors, and everybody is helping. They have a point man for all of the logistics. It's really incredible.”

Stenson received assistance this week from members of the music faculty of the University of South Dakota, including Dr. David Holdhusen, the chair of the Department of Music, and the director of USD's choral activities.

“I really can't think of many states in the United States that do full-week honor choirs,” Stenson said. “I know Minnesota does, but I don't think Minnesota has this kind of organization. The kids are wonderful; they're so eager to try anything, and they're just a pleasure to work with.”

In 1974, the South Dakota All-State Honor Choir was formed by choral directors Stan Rishoi, Perry Jones, Alan Stanga, Bob Ellingson, Donald Peterson, and Rolf Anderson to provide a quality musical experience for the state's top high school vocalists. Black Hills State College provided the first setting for the 150 select high school singers.

Each year one of South Dakota's universities or colleges hosts the event and the choir has been continued to be conducted by the nation's finest directors.

“The honor choir rotates around the state,” Holdhusen said. “It will be in Vermillion about every four or five years or so. It's a bid out process; each campus bids when they have the time and the availability to host, and it's chosen by the board.”

The South Dakota contingent of the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) provides leadership and staff for the yearly event. Section leaders, accompanists, and counselors are ACDA members dedicated to the success of the program.

Al Stenga, the executive director of the honor choir from Sioux Falls, described the process that was undertaken to get the 142 young people for this week's performance by explaining how next year's honor choir will be formed.

“We’ll begin for next year probably in September, and we’ll send out information to music and choir directors in high schools throughout the state,” he said.

Students interested in auditioning for the honors choir must apply by March 1. Auditions are held in April.

“Right now, we have three adjudicators that go across the state, and we audition in Rapid City, Huron, Freeman, and Sioux Falls,” Stenga said. “Students come prepared to sing a solo, preferably art song music.”

They are also judged on their tonal memory, sight-singing abilities, and must take a written test.

“From those people who audition, then, we select the choir,” he said. “They are notified in May, before school is out, and they are asked to register by the first part of June. We then send out the music to them, and by the time they come to the camp, they’re to be prepared with the music.”

Stenga has been involved with honor choir since its start in South Dakota over four decades ago.

“The first honor choir was realized in 1974, and it was held at Black Hills State in Spearfish,” he said. “For most of these kids, it’s an experience they don’t duplicate until maybe when they get to college to sing at the college or university level. It turns some of them into professional musicians when they see the possibilities of what they are doing and what other folks are doing.

“It’s just a wonderful experience for them,” Stenga said. “They are having so much fun doing it.”