

Amandla Chorus celebrates 25 years of singing for PEACE, JUSTICE & HUMANITY

By STEVE PFARRER
Staff Writer

It's not every chorus that has Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu joining them in song.

But if you spend two and a half decades singing about peace, justice, freedom and the ties that bind us, chances are you'll have the kinds of experiences that embody that spirit of humanity.

This Saturday evening, the Amandla Chorus of Greenfield is marking its 25th anniversary with a celebratory concert at Helen Hills Hills Chapel at Smith College in Northampton. Amandla comes from the Zulu word for "power," and in this case the power comes from songs that embrace community and joy in many languages, from English to Swedish to Swahili and Spanish.

Though the 40-member chorus got its start primarily singing South African freedom songs, at a time when the struggle against apartheid in that country was reaching its climatic stage, Amandla has widened its scope over the years to encompass songs exploring more universal themes, says long-time director Eveline MacDougall.

"I was 23 when I started with this, and [the anti-apartheid movement] was very much my view of the world," said MacDougall, 48. "Today we look at a broader way of defining freedom, like gay rights, and different kinds of music ... from lullabies to songs with beautifully crafted lyrics and harmonies that can appeal to all ages."

MacDougall, of Greenfield, has been the key figure in Amandla since its beginning in 1988. She grew up in Quebec, the daughter of two classically trained musicians — her mother a singer, her father a composer and conductor — and is a vocalist and multi-instrumentalist, counting the piano, cello and violin as part of her repertoire. She's used her classical training in crafting some of the intricate harmonies that define Amandla's sound.

But she's also long been drawn both to the spirit and sound of world and folk music. "There's something so democratic about it — it's music for everyone," said MacDougall, noting that though membership in Amandla comes via audition, few of the cho-



Eveline MacDougall directs the Amandla Chorus.



Diedrick Snoek of Easthampton



Lilly Lombard of Northampton and Maria Garcia of Florence



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Eveline MacDougall, front right, directs the Amandla Chorus at Temple Israel in Greenfield.

■ See AMANDLA / Page C5



Abby Dallmann of Amherst sings with the Amandla Chorus.

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Amandla Chorus

Continued from C1
Chorus members have professional singing experience.

MacDougall has taught music privately over the years, led other choral groups and served as an artist-in-residence in a number of schools. But Amandla, she said, "has always had a special place in my heart."

Beyond the songs themselves, like "Freedom Agitation," a melody MacDougall wrote to words by abolitionist Frederick Douglass, Amandla pursues its community mission through community engagement: singing in jails, for patients in hospitals and hospices, for schools and soup kitchens as well in more traditional concert halls. It's a big part of what appeals to members, a good number of whom come from Hampshire County.

Diedrick Snook of Easthampton, a retired Smith College psychology professor, said he was especially moved when the group sang a few years ago for patients in the brain injury unit at Holyoke Rehabilitation Hospital. "We had a wonderful response, a high level of enthusiasm, from people with serious injuries who might not get back to what they were."

Joanne Gold of Florence, who's been with the chorus for about 15 years, says there's also a tight personal bond between members, as MacDougall has long worked to make members feel committed to one another as well as to the songs. "The whole atmosphere is just so amazing, so electric, something you really want to be a part of," she said.

Her 19-year-old daughter, Sadie Gold-Shapiro, who will open Saturday's concert on vocals and ukulele, "grew up with the chorus," Gold said. "I would take her to rehearsals when she was younger, and there were other mothers there with their kids — it was that kind of atmosphere."

Snook, who's been with Amandla for six years, lost his wife a few years after he joined the group, and he says being part of it helped him cope with his grief. "You develop an esprit de corps that really becomes important," he said.

Humming a tune
MacDougall wasn't thinking of any of this on the day, in late 1987, that she started humming a South African freedom song in Greenfield, where she was hosting a meeting of activists concerned about U.S. military spending. She'd learned the song, "Siyahamba," while working on a communal farm in Winchendon

that summer, where everyone sang together after work.

At the rally, a Wendell woman, Rosie Heidekamp, who'd spent some childhood years in South Africa, recognized the melody MacDougall was humming. Their conversation about the music led MacDougall to organize an informal session in Wendell Community Church in January 1988 for anyone interested in learning South African freedom songs in Zulu and English — and from those impromptu beginnings, Amandla was born.

Over the next few years, they opened for folk veteran Tom Paxton at a fundraising concert for Traprock Peace Center in Deerfield. They also toured with a chorus of South Africans, Barwa, made up of black students and faculty at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who had been exiled from their homeland during the apartheid era.

They also sang on Boston's Esplanade in 1990 as part of a celebratory concert for Nelson Mandela, the famed South African leader who'd just been released from 27 years of prison earlier that year. Mandela appeared to be about to leave the show before Amandla had performed — but when the group broke into "Nikosi Sikelel' iAfrika" ("God Bless Africa"), a pan-African liberation anthem, Mandela sang along with the chorus and then shook members' hands afterward.

Some months later they had a similar experience, performing at UMass in a concert honoring an appearance by Desmond Tutu, another seminal figure from the anti-apartheid movement. Tutu came on stage and sang along when they performed "Nikosi Sikelel' iAfrika."

"To meet those two men, at that stage of my life, and to have them sing with us was just an unbelievable experience," MacDougall said. "I couldn't have made up that plot."

A commitment to music
Over the years, the chorus has also shared stages with other notable figures, like folk music legend Pete Seeger and labor activist Cesar Chavez. As members have come and gone, they've kept the music sharp through a busy schedule: two hours of rehearsal every week for much of the year, and typically about 25 or so performances a year, though the full chorus does not perform all the time.

More to the point, MacDougall expects members to make a serious commitment to the music, studying it at home as well

as at rehearsal. "She demands a lot of us musically," said Martha Ackelsberg, a Smith College professor of political science and women's studies. "She wants us to really understand and feel what a song is about, and to sing from that place."

At a recent rehearsal at the Temple Israel in Greenfield, MacDougall led the chorus through several songs, like "Tina Singu," a South African folk song sung in Xhosa, and "Lucky in Life," a tune built around a poem about world peace by a then-9-year-old Michigan boy, Cameron Penny. MacDougall set the words to music.

The harmonies on several numbers were complex, as were changes in intonation and volume for the different voices in the choir. MacDougall stopped the group at one point in the middle of a song: "You're coming in a little late," she said to a line of singers in the back row. "You've got to watch me. ... Let's take it again from the left."

Though it sometimes feels like a chore to make the trip from Northampton to Greenfield, says Ackelsberg, it's worth it to be part of Amandla. "It keeps me going, through all the day-to-day stress that comes from a job, and just from life in general."

The chorus' commitment to helping others remains a key attraction as well. Saturday's concert will raise money for the Northampton Survival Center, as well as an orphanage in Haiti and one in India. A few months ago, chorus member Lily Lombard of Northampton, who's also the principle founder of Grow Food Northampton, went to Haiti with her family to help with poverty relief.

Looking back on her years with Amandla, MacDougall says she often marvels at how they've ended up where they are today. "I didn't have a business plan or a specific strategy. This has been kind of like my life in general, where I go edgewise into things. But it's worked."

The Amandla Chorus will perform Saturday at 7 p.m. at Helen Hills Hills Chapel at Smith College in Northampton. Tickets cost \$10, \$5 for students and seniors, and are available in advance at Broadside Bookshop in Northampton, Cup & Top Cafe in Florence and the World Eye Bookshop in Greenfield. Tickets may also be available at the door. For information, visit www.amandlachorus.org.



Martha Ackelsberg, left, of Florence, Dina Friedman of Hadley, center, and Barb April, of Amherst, rehearse with the Amandla Chorus at Temple Israel in Greenfield.

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