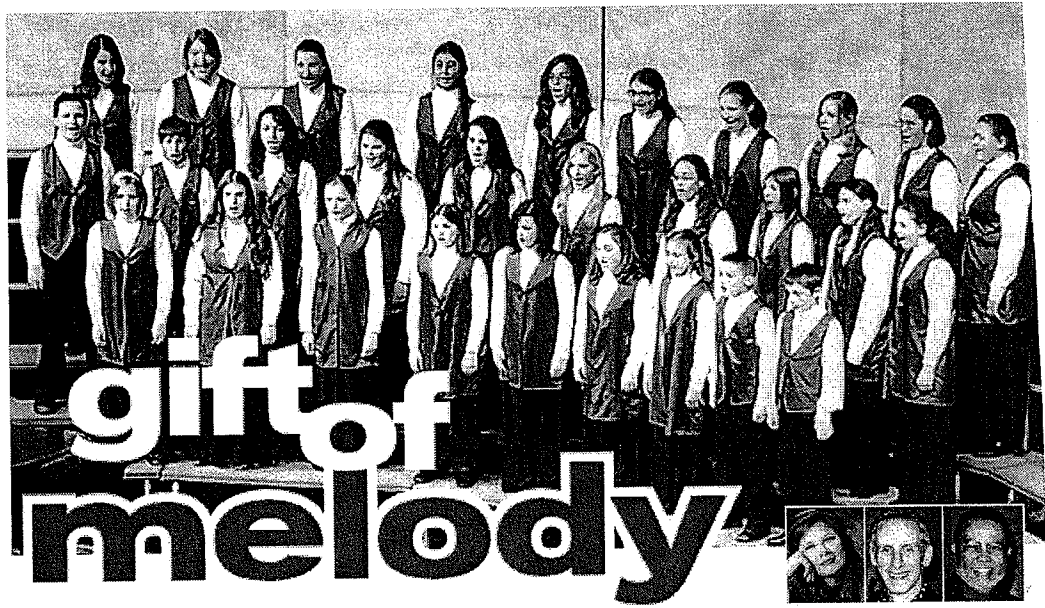


culture



If you go
 What "The Gift of the Magi," a world premiere, plus the Christmas portions of Handel's "Messiah"
Performances
 7 p.m. Sunday, Ferguson Center for the Arts, Newport News; 8 p.m. Tuesday, Regent University, Communication and Performing Arts Center, Virginia Beach
Tickets \$25-\$85; (757) 892-6366; visit www.virginiasymphony.org

O. Henry's 'Gift of the Magi' is reborn with singers, dancers, a chamber orchestra and a tuneful score

By Teresa Annas
The Virginian-Pilot

Perhaps a decade ago, a friend gave Carol Thomas Downing a book, O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi." The story of a poor young couple sacrificing to buy each other a Christmas present moved her. Every year she rereads it.

"I was sitting there one Christmas looking through this book, and suddenly the whole vision descended into my brain," said Downing, founder and artistic director of the Virginia Children's Chorus.

"It was one of those moments where I could just see the story expressed through dance and through a children's choir singing with chamber orchestra."

This holiday season, the Portsmouth musician's vision is coming to life in a big way. On Sunday, the world premiere of "The Gift of the Magi" — along with the Christ-

mas portions of Handel's "Messiah" — will be staged at the Ferguson Center for the Arts in Newport News, with a second performance Tuesday at Regent University in Virginia Beach.

The 24-minute piece was composed by Adolphus Hailstork of Virginia Beach, who has top national credits and whose work she loves. Downing's group commissioned Hailstork, and at the composer's suggestion she wrote the lyrics. Twenty-two members of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra will perform in the pit.

Thirty-nine of the most experienced singers in Downing's group will perform. The vocalists, ages 13 to 17, will dance a little, too. Todd Rosenlieb, a gifted choreographer who runs a Norfolk dance company, created story-telling moves both for his own dancers and for singers.

For Downing, this is "one of those pinch-me moments. It's

really an answer to dreams and prayers."

JoAnna Falletta, Virginia Symphony's music director, who will conduct the program, emphasized the importance of presenting new music by Hailstork. "Sometimes we take Adolphus for granted. He's a neighbor. But this is a very big deal for us."

"He's the real deal. He's a very famous and extraordinarily gifted composer," Falletta stressed that it's been an effective collaboration, resulting in an unusual form. "The story is acted out, partly through dance and partly through singing. No one tells the story from beginning to end, and yet the story is very clear."

She described Hailstork's composition as "very tuneful, with sections that are quite dancelike, and sections that are very moving and emotional. His language is always tonal, always melodic. But it never seems predictable. It's always a surprise."

The composition includes a suite of four songs. As he wrote, Hailstork referred to a storyboard provided by Rosenlieb and Downing. To get the sound he wanted, Hailstork blended romantic instruments, such as harp and strings, with "antique" ones, including double reeds and flutes.

"One of my favorite moments is the embrace," Hailstork said. That's when Jim first sees that Della has cut off her gorgeous long hair, having sold it to buy a watch fob for him. Meanwhile, he has sold his watch to buy jeweled hair combs for her.

"He pauses, walks around her, 'What's going on here?' She's kinda scared about his reaction. Then he relaxes and embraces her. I love that."

Hailstork is an unpretentious interviewee. Regarding his own music, he said, "You gotta like pretty tunes. If you like like pretty tunes, you'll like it."

He said writing music to

dream team Carol Thomas Downing, who heads the Virginia Children's Chorus, first had the idea of a choral and dance version of O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi." The piece was composed by Adolphus Hailstork, right, with choreography by Todd Rosenlieb, center.



lyrics comes easily to him. "As soon as I read the words, I hear the melody. That is just a habit. I won't say a gift. I'll just say a habit."

Downing has marveled over his "habit." Hailstork actually delivered his composition early, in July, which gave all the collaborators plenty of time to contribute to the whole.

"It is truly amazing that this is all coming together so beautifully at this time," Downing said. "Everybody's finances are tight. The story could not be more appropriate for this Christmas."

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