

Bringing the Essence of Song to the Heart of Art-Reach: An Introduction to LyricFest

PHILADELPHIA, PA- In recent decades, combining genres such as music, poetry, spoken word and singing has become a popular approach to packaging artistic rhythms and making soulful offerings to audiences. Philadelphia's own LyricFest provides such an opportunity to its viewers, connecting to audiences via gifts of song, spoken word, poetry and music.

LyricFest is the brainchild of its three founding Artistic Directors: Suzanne DuPlantis, Randi Marrasso and Laura Ward; each founder is also an experienced songstress with long musical experience intertwined within orchestras, operas and symphonies throughout the country. Founded in January 2003, the festival seeks to tell the story of a chosen historic theme. "We often choose themes that encourage thought, reflection and memory," says DuPlantis. In many LyricFest showings, performers seek to lift the audience into the actual moments, stirring them from the present and exploring such themes as achieving national identity, the finding of freedom, or retracing the steps of immigrant composers from centuries ago. An example of one of the festival's vibrant programs is *A Brave Heart Is a Powerful Weapon*, which features songs and readings of war and peace. DuPlantis explains further that this particular program includes a biographical sketch in musical form where the composer's own story is relayed to viewers and listeners through letters and scripted narrative. "For this series, we've already done Benjamin Britten, Mozart, Shakespeare and Mahler," says DuPlantis. "We also do many light-hearted and fun programs, like *Shall We Dance*, which includes all songs with dance rhythms and love songs."

As LyricFest performers grace the stage in their programs, they not only reenact the themes and reflections of historic composers and writers but they also reach out and touch the souls of those who are listening and watching the performance. The festival's public relations consultant, Inna Lobanova-Heasley of PR Perfect LLC, comments that the ability to sing is available to everyone. "We are all singers in our hearts; some of us sing our hearts out as a hobby, or in the shower. When you are at a LyricFest concert, that opera singer produces an amazing powerful sound a few feet away from you. And then you get to meet the singers after the concert and realize that they are not super-humans but they are just very talented, hard working and dedicated people. That human potential is a great inspiration to all of us," says Heasley. Using the common denominator of song, festival performers have an innate ability to search within themselves, glide into a chosen theme, and reach out to connect with the souls of viewers. "The great music brings us closer together and helps us be more open to diversity and hence be better advocates of peace," says Heasley. The festival's perpetual goal of bringing audiences together through the shared experience of song is thus continuously realized.

Art-Reach and LyricFest met through sheer chance. As Heasley worked one day on various festival initiatives that focused on reaching out to underserved Philadelphia communities, she passed by an article discussing Art-Reach and its mission in a Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance publication. "I immediately got in contact with them and informed the LyricFest co-founding artistic directors," says Heasley. And from there, another Art-Reach partnership was conceived.

On November 8th and 9th LyricFest will present *A World of Friends* to its audiences, including Art-Reach members. The performance will feature classical, ethnic folk and modern musical selections as well as folk dance. The show seeks to explore global cultures and stories, led by members of the LyricFest performance team, the Voloshky Ukrainian Dance Ensemble, the Pennsylvania Girlchoir, and other independent performers. Art-Reach audience members will have the chance to realize their inner song and ability to sing. Performances will be held at the Presbyterian Church in Chestnut Hill on Saturday, November 8th, and then at the First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia on Sunday, November 9th.

LyricFest recognizes Art-Reach as an extension of its staff to ensure that its performances and art forms are more accessible to the community. This fall, the festival is reaching out to the community, seeking to

lure listeners to the stage of *A World of Friends* where they will hear beautiful solos and choral music and witness incredible dancing and theatre. When asked why potential Art-Reach audience members should come to the performance, Suzanne DuPlantis insists, “Try it, you'll like it, and you WILL NOT be disappointed!” Those interested in further details about the performance should visit the Art-Reach website and member calendar.

LyricFest’s kaleidoscope of artistic form is essential to Philadelphia’s rich creative culture, and it gives audiences of all types an unparalleled view into moments that were once frozen in time but are now brought back to life. Soon the times now referred to as “the present” will be those we reference as historical, and thus displayed on a future LyricFest stage encased in song and spirit.

-Talia Adell Stinson