

- NINA MOINI:** This Friday night, the music of Korea will be showcased in a special performance by the Oratorio Society of Minnesota and the University of Minnesota School of Music. But it doesn't stop there. Members of the choir next week will then travel to South Korea for a choral cultural exchange.
- Joining me now with more on this concert and trip is Matthew Mahaffey, professor of music at the U of M and artistic director of the Oratorio Society of Minnesota. Thanks for being with us, Matthew.
- MATTHEW MAHAFFEY:** Glad to be here.
- NINA MOINI:** What a fun couple of weeks you have ahead of you. For starters, could you tell us, for those who don't know, what is an oratorio?
- MATTHEW MAHAFFEY:** An oratorio is a classical genre of music that originated in the 17th century in Italy when opera houses were closed during Lent. And so audiences and composers still wanted to compose music, so they composed sacred-themed operas that were presented without staging or costumes. It was the original version of oratorio. And today, it has kind of evolved to be any large piece of music for choir and instruments.
- NINA MOINI:** Cool. So how did the Oratorio Society of Minnesota and this choir come to be?
- MATTHEW MAHAFFEY:** Well, I'm the leader of the Oratorio Society since 2008 and was already a professor at the university, and we decided to join forces to create an adult music camp in the summertime. And so since 2007, we've been hosting a summer chorus at the university that is open to all singers. So anybody out there who's wanting to try their hand at singing could sign up for this summer camp, and we meet in July and perform a concert at the end of our rehearsal period.
- NINA MOINI:** So fun. So anyone, it sounds like, can join. And I understand there are multiple generations of families sometimes singing together. Who do you come across?
- MATTHEW MAHAFFEY:** We get people from all across the Twin Cities, all ages. We've had students as young as 14, 15 years old and singers into their upper 80s. We've had multiple generations of families sing together. We're typically between 100 and 150 voices in the summertime. It just depends on the year, who we get. And we've done everything from Broadway songs to classical music by Mozart. And this year, we're focusing on the music from South Korea.
- NINA MOINI:** I hate to say it, but you never turn anyone away. What if someone's really bad?
- MATTHEW MAHAFFEY:** Well, the point is that it's open to all. And we do have a variety of abilities. We have people who sing in choir every week, and we have people who've never sung in a choir before. But we work together to make it the best that we can do.
- NINA MOINI:** Yeah. Everyone has a beautiful voice. You just have to find it, right, and draw that out of them.
- MATTHEW MAHAFFEY:** Exactly. And that's my job, is to help people find their singing voice for this concert.
- NINA MOINI:** Well, I got a couple people I can recommend. Just kidding. So the concert tomorrow night is titled "The Musical Journey of Korea." Tell us why you chose this theme this time around.

MATTHEW MAHAFFEY: Well, I reconnected with a former student of mine who did her doctorate at the University of Minnesota, who was from South Korea and returned to South Korea upon graduation. And we thought it would be fun to try to put a tour together where we could reconnect. And so that made the summer chorus a perfect time to do this, because people are tending to want to travel in the summertime.

And there's a member of the Oratorio Society named Randy who puts together tours like this. So we put a whole bunch of heads together, and we're going to perform this music here in St. Paul tomorrow. And then about 45 singers from the choir will leave on Wednesday to South Korea, where we'll perform the concert twice in South Korea with South Korean choirs.

NINA MOINI: So cool. OK, we're going to take a listen to one of the songs you'll be performing. This is from a different choir, but we want to give folks a sense. So here's the song "Oh, Korea"

[MUSIC - "OH, KOREA"]

So powerful. Very moving. How did you choose the music for the concert?

MATTHEW MAHAFFEY: Well, I had the advantage of having my student over in South Korea, and I started looking into all different types of music. And then I thought, I should ask her what the pieces are that she feels would be indicative of a wide cross-section of Korean music. And so she and a couple of her friends put their heads together and came up with a list, and I went through the list and said, I think these are the pieces that this group, the summer chorus, which is-- we only have eight rehearsals, and we're unauditioned-- that we could pull off. And so that's one of the pieces, which was written about 20 years ago. But it incorporates modern compositional techniques and mixes that you could hear with intervals that are indicative of Asian music.

And I'm not sure how well you could hear it on the recording there, but there's a Korean drum called a buk that is played in that, and it's very powerful, and it presents this driving rhythm. So as part of the concert, we'll have a drummer playing the buk and a couple other Korean drums. That person's coming up from the Korean Performing Arts Center in Chicago, and they have a really wonderful program there. And we were able to source a drummer to come up to join us here in St. Paul.

We'll also have a gayageum, which is a stringed instrument, two pianos, a flute and clarinet, and a choir of 100 voices singing music like that, some also traditional pieces. And I think it's going to be a really well-rounded program, and I think people will be excited to hear all the different sounds and textures that come with this music.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, let's do one more song that you all will be performing. This is "Golden Field."

[MUSIC - "GOLDEN FIELD"]

That's beautiful. So you all will be leaving for the trip to South Korea, and then you're going to meet with choirs there. How exciting is that? How much value is there in doing these cultural exchanges? I'm sure it's really powerful.

MATTHEW MAHAFFEY: Yes, I've done several before, and the highlight is always-- I mean, seeing the country is great, but being able to meet people and share in an activity with them that is common, even though the language might be different or our customs might be different, to connect on that level is really powerful and, I think, creates great memories and great feelings towards one another.

We were just discussing last night some small gifts that we could bring from Minnesota to share with them. And I know we have some salted nut rolls and some blankets from Faribault and different things that we're bringing to share. And I know that they are so excited to welcome us as well. So I think it's going to be a great experience to travel. And we're just thrilled to be able to share the concert here in St. Paul at the Ordway tomorrow night.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely. Matthew, thank you so much for joining us. Wishing you all wonderful and safe travels and just a lot of fun. Thank you.

MATTHEW MAHAFFEY: Yes, thank you so much.

NINA MOINI: Matthew Mahaffey is a professor of music at the U of M and artistic director of the Oratorio Society of Minnesota.