

Arias & Airs Concerts

Presented by the Montgomery Museum & Lewis Miller Regional Art Center

Opera, Celtic and Appalachian music – what do they have in common? Area music lovers will get a chance to find out on April 17 and April 18 when the Montgomery Museum and Lewis Miller Regional Art Center presents “*Arias & Airs*”, a pair of concerts featuring European opera tenor Robert Chafin and the Celtibillies of southwest Virginia. The concert will be presented April 17 at the Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke and April 18 at Christiansburg High School.

Robert Chafin, a native of Christiansburg, lives in Hannover, Germany and performs in leading operas throughout Europe. In 1996 he made his singing debut at Carnegie Hall with the New York Opera Orchestra. These days he travels Europe and America performing Opera as well as concert recitals. Currently, he is preparing for his debut singing the well loved Italian opera Norma by composer Bellini. That role requires not only learning to sing the part of character Pollione, but learning to do it effectively in Italian, since Chafin does not speak the language.

“Singing Opera requires a huge commitment of time and energy and it is exhausting”, says Chafin, “But the one thing that gets you through, is that feeling of getting up and communicating a feeling through song, to express something from deep within.”

As a child growing up in Christiansburg, Robert took advantage of every opportunity to sing. “I think they had to kick me out of the Children's Choir at church,” Robert recalls. “I loved singing so much, but I had reached the point where I no longer fit in the robes.” While pursuing a double major in music and biology at Virginia Tech, Robert performed with the Meistersingers and began to develop a deep appreciation for classical music. With the encouragement of his pre-med advisor, Dr. Zweifel, Robert transferred to the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. “My dream was to study both music and medicine, but once I started at the Conservatory, I knew this is what I wanted to do.”

While studying at the Conservatory, Robert competed in and won a number of singing competitions, but it was his third place finish in a Columbus Ohio Opera competition that set him on the road to a career in music. “First place was a full scholarship to study German at the Goethe Institute in Germany, but the first place winner wanted to stay in the US, and the second place had already done it, so they asked me. I cancelled my place at the Academy of Vocal Arts, and went off to Germany.”

Once in Germany, Robert made good use of the opportunity and auditioned at numerous opera houses. “I went to sing in Mannheim, and they took me on the spot, and was immediately engaged in my first resident singing position. I have been living in Germany since, and singing based here, going back and forth to different countries, and

continents.” Robert says. His professional career has now spanned over 20 years and over 40 operas.

The Celtibillies have been together since 1994 and the band includes Becky Barlow on hammered dulcimer and keyboards, Jack Hinshelwood on guitar and fiddle, Tim Sauls on banjo, bouzouki and guitar, and Jeff Hofmann on bass. The group’s music has been featured on Fiona Ritchie’s Thistle and Shamrock program on National Public Radio and on the nationally syndicated Song of the Mountains show on PBS TV. Music from the group’s recordings prompted Bluegrass Unlimited to quote “A masterful work of art that transcends all musical genres”.

This past summer the group completed a 10-day, 1,500-mile tour of Alaska, from Fairbanks in the north to the Russian settlement of Seldovia south of Anchorage. “That was one amazing trip”, Hinshelwood says, “even though we took it during one of the wettest, coldest Alaskan summers on record, not to mention traveling at a time when gas prices were the highest they have ever been in this nation’s history. But the incredible scenery and wonderful people we met more than made up for it.”

The band’s itinerary included the Deltana Fair, Out North Theatre in Anchorage, the Down East Saloon in Homer, and a concert for the Seldovia Arts Council. In addition to several radio interviews, they even managed to fit in 2 days sightseeing in Alaska’s crown jewel, Denali National Park.

To get where they were going, the group traveled by car, boat and plane. “Alaska and its communities are not easy to get to, so they are usually not on the itinerary of very many touring groups. When groups do make the effort to go there, Alaskans are very appreciative and supportive of them.” Hinshelwood says.

The idea for the trip arose when a fan in Fairbanks saw the group on the Song of the Mountains TV program, and asked “when are you all going to play in Alaska?” That was all the inspiration needed, as none of the group had ever been to Alaska but all wanted to go.

Now back in the “lower 48”, the band is looking forward to the collaboration with Robert Chafin. “Working with musicians from other genres is always rewarding because as an artist you’re constantly looking for ways to challenge yourself and expand your horizons. You’re also usually surprised at how much common ground you have, even though you work in different genres. Music is music, I guess”, Hinshelwood notes.

For the Montgomery Museum concerts, Chafin is looking forward to performing back in the area he grew up in. “The concert will be a blending of the art song tradition, and some folk melodies, and classical "Lieder" or songs, in English. Then there will be a few arias and operetta offerings, in different languages, to give a more international appeal. I thought it would be fun to do it with other musicians, and decided that it would be a

great opportunity to get in touch with the Celtibillies. Robert and the Celtibillies will each perform separately and will also meet in the middle, performing a traditional hymn medley, and a more recent crossover medley of popular Broadway and movie tunes. “There should be something for everyone” Robert says.

The concerts will benefit the Montgomery Museum and Lewis Miller Regional Art Center on Pepper Street in Christiansburg. The Montgomery Museum collects and exhibits county history and regional art and provides educational programs about their collections. The Museum has two satellite branches: the Riner Museum at the Cannery and the Meadowbrook Museum at Shawsville. Part of the Museum is dedicated to the artwork of Lewis Miller, a native of Pennsylvania who traveled extensively and used his art talents to sketch many scenes from his travels, including many historical renderings of places and buildings in the Montgomery County area from 1856 and 1857.

More information on the concerts by Robert Chafin and the Celtibillies can be obtained by calling the Montgomery Museum at 540 382-5644. Tickets for the concerts can be purchased at the Montgomery Museum and various locations. The Montgomery Museum website also has information about the concerts at www.montgomerymuseum.org.