

Entertainment

Svitanya to illuminate Eastern European music in North Wales

By Frank D. Quattrone
Ticket Editor

They sing of the seasons and they sing of love. Matchmakers and revolutionary heroes share the soundstage, as do dancers, dreamers and doves.

They call themselves Svitanya:

the Eastern European Women's Vocal Ensemble. And they will perform at the Gwynedd Friends Coffeehouse on Saturday, May 10.

The name of this eight-member, essentially a capella choir means "the light at sunrise" in Croatian and Ukrainian and, as you might expect, they sing all their

songs in the original languages, which include Russian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Serbian and Polish.

There is a large natural audience of Ukrainians and Eastern Europeans in Jenkintown, Horscham and Greater Northeast Philadelphia. But if you think this sounds like a hard sell because of the language barrier, you are badly mistaken.

Svitanya's songs are made for the musically adventurous. And at their concerts, according to longtime Svitanya member Laura Howson, "We try to introduce the song and we give a little translation of each song in the program. They tend to be short, so there's a tremendous variety in what they will hear."

True enough. The songs in Svitanya's 2005 CD "First Light" (a nice play on the ensemble's name) range from reverential and haunting to rousing and even strident, depending on the subject.

In a phone interview on May 2, Howson said, "There's a lot of emotion and life in the music. There are stories from daily life, like cutting wheat, to going off to a

new life in marriage. But there's also a song about an older man dancing with a younger woman.

"There are some songs and others that exude village life, and all the songs contain the harmonies indigenous to the region.

At the May 10 concert, Svitanya will be accompanied, on several songs, by five instruments — guitar, tambourin (a long drum), doumbek (a goblet-shaped hand drum), tapan (a large, double-headed drum) and a gaida (a Macedonian bagpipe made of goatskin).

Talk about authentic!

Howson said that all eight current members of Svitanya "share a passion for the dissonances as well as the harmonies of the music. It integrates itself almost into your soul. It's uplifting to sing. It envelops you."

So who are Svitanya?

Howson, who is also a member of the Philadelphia Handbell Ensemble (featured on these pages a couple of years ago), is a biochemist at Merck & Co. full time. She became attracted to the songs of Eastern Europe when she was a freshman at Haverford College. She attended an open rehearsal of

Svitanya directed by Kim Fedchak and soon began singing with the group, becoming a full-fledged member in 2000.

Music Director Fedchak, who once taught Russian at Swarthmore College, currently teaches math at Radnor High School. Of Ukrainian descent, Fedchak is also an instrumentalist and lead singer with the world fusion band Animus, specializing in Middle Eastern music, and plays English country dance music with Socks.

Mary Kalyna, the daughter of Ukrainian immigrants, once sang in the "Kobzar" Ukrainian National and Verdi Opera choruses. She is also a distant relative of Fedchak.

Susan Anderson is active in the international folk dancing community and is the leader of the International Folk Sounds orchestra and the recently formed Izvornotes, and performs Appalachian clogging with FiddleKicks.

Anne Eyrhart, a longtime singer and folk dancer and managing director of the world-famous Voloshky Ukrainian Dance Ensemble, was the primary producer of the CD "First Light." In 1998 she and her daughter, Leela Eyrhart, a psychology major at Drexel University and a singer in various area choruses, became members of Svitanya.

Newest members of the ensemble are Kayla Ankeny, a certified

massage therapist who has sung in various theatrical and musical productions throughout the area, and Bulgarian native Petia Zamfirova, whose experience includes 12 years' classical training on the piano and a lifelong fascination with ethnic and international folk music and dance.

Howson said, "It has been our experience that people are a little curious about our music. Once they see us, standing in a 'C' shape to blend our voices well, and hear the music, they feel, 'Oh, this is cool!'"

"All we ask is that people consider coming out to hear us. It will be an expected pleasure, something new."

Svitanya: The Eastern European Women's Vocal Ensemble

will perform at Gwynedd Friends Coffeehouse, Rte. 202 & Sumneytown Pike, North Wales, PA 19454, Saturday, May 10, 8 p.m. Tickets: \$5. Informal videos available on YouTube. They will also perform at Jenkintown High School International Festival, 325 Highland Ave., Jenkintown, PA 19046, Tuesday, May 20, 7:30 p.m. Info: 215-844-1066 or www.svitanje.org.

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