

The Great Minnesota Sing-Together

By **WILLIAM RANDALL BEARD**, Special to the Star Tribune
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When was the last time you read "classical music" and "Minnesota State Fair" in the same sentence? On Saturday, a wealth of new classical choral music will be celebrated at the State Fair. This rare performance of contemporary music at the fair is the result of the American Composers Forum's statewide commissioning project called Minnesota Voices, which connected five composers with six community choruses statewide in commemoration of 150 years of Minnesota statehood.

Choruses applied to participate in the project, and those chosen picked a composer from among more than 20 that applied for this program.

The Minneapolis Youth Chorus, the Arrowhead Chorale in Duluth, the Bemidji Chorale in Bemidji, the Choral Arts Ensemble in Rochester, the Minnesota Valley Chorale in Mankato and the Prairie Arts Chorale in southwest Minnesota chose to work with composers Edie Hill, Janika Vandervelde, Paul Brandvik, J. David Moore and Brian Schmidt. The choruses premiered each of the commissions in home concerts, and now are bringing them to the fair.

"This is a shot in the arm for those of us doing music not in the Twin Cities," said Stanley R. Wold, artistic director of the Arrowhead Chorale.

The Chorale chose to partner with Twin Cities composer Vandervelde, a decision that thrilled her. "I love Duluth," she said, "as well as writing for chamber choir." Her composition focuses on Lake Superior. "I wrote at the shore, so the piece is infused with the feeling of the region."

Hill was equally excited to be a part of this project. "Minneapolis has been my home for over 20 years. I wanted to be a part of the sesquicentennial," she said.

Her work with the Minneapolis Youth Chorus was collaborative. The children in the choir decided they wanted the piece to focus on the Mississippi River. "I wanted to give them a sense of ownership," Hill said.

"It was great for the kids to work with a living composer," said Patrice Arasim, Minneapolis Youth Chorus founding director. "They were so full of joy at the end. The reward was huge."

Other pieces celebrate the annual cycle of seasons that freeze and thaw the northern lakes, the glacial winters that honed Minnesota's landscape and southwestern Minnesota's prairie landscape.

The project is a collaboration between the Composers Forum and the Minnesota Chorale. In addition to their individual performances, the six choirs will join the Chorale in a 300-voice performance of another commissioned piece, "Minnesota, That's Me," by Carol Barnett, with a text by poet Marisha Chamberlain, that will be receiving its world premiere.

"It's a whimsical piece that tries to characterize the many cultural communities that have come to make a home in Minnesota," said Kathy Saltzman Romey, the chorale's artistic director.

For the choruses, this represents a great deal of exposure they would be unlikely to get any other way. And Romey has been working with the choruses and mentoring the conductors. These are just two ways that it's hoped the project will have long-lasting effects for choral music in Minnesota.

"I have already talked to my board about looking into commissioning more," Wold said. "The application process gave me the chance to review the music of a lot of Minnesota composers. It gave me ideas for the future."

Amid the corn dogs and other State Fair attractions, Minnesota Voices is a rare opportunity to celebrate new music that honors the state's diversity and rich choral tradition.

William Randall Beard is a Minneapolis writer.