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HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

Finding hope in challenging times

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Upcoming performances by the Brattleboro Concert

Choir focus on optimism and community

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TEXT BODY:

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“Thy Coming Morrow Will Be Clear and Bright,” is the
theme of the Brattleboro Concert Choir’s next performance,
Saturday, Jan. 31, at 2 p.m. and Sunday, Feb. 1, at 4 p.m., at the
Latchis Theatre.

The Concert Choir is the oldest performing ensemble of
the Brattleboro Music Center.

11 “Usually, a concert program starts in one of two ways for
12 me,” said Dr. Jonathan Harvey, the Concert Choir’s music
13 director, who holds a Doctor of Musical Arts in conducting and
14 music history from University of Connecticut. “Either it begins
15 with an idea that I then find music to fit, or, as in this case, it
16 begins with a particular piece that I build a program around.”

17 He said the starting point for this concert was Marques L.
18 A. Garrett’s 2022 piece, “My Heart Be Brave,” a setting of a poem
19 by early 20th-century poet and Civil Rights activist James Weldon
20 Johnson, which speaks to the necessity of courage in the face of
21 oppression, cruelty, and darkness.

22 “The poem was written by a Black man in the post-
23 Reconstruction United States,” Harvey continued, “in the form of
24 a Shakespearean sonnet.” Harvey continued. “Garrett then takes
25 that poem and effectively communicates ideas of fear and hope
26 — it feels tailor-made for our moment in history.”

27 Harvey said that what resonates most strongly for him
28 about the piece ~~for him~~ is the sense of hard-won hopefulness, so
29 he built the program around that idea, around music that
30 considers the future in that light.

31 “I think it’s important for a performance to be deeply
32 informed both by the origins of the work and by the expectations
33 and needs of an audience in today’s world,” he said.
34 “Communicating those ideas to the performers is an ongoing
35 process. I’m lucky to be able to work with the Concert Choir
36 every week, so that we can gradually build the meaning together,
37 both through musical technical devices and through discussions
38 of meaning.”

39 ~~Harvey~~ said Communicating those ideas to an
40 audience is tougher “because we have less time together.” ~~he~~
41 continued. “He writes notes for the concert program to help
42 illuminate the music, he says, and ~~he~~ always speaks from the stage
43 during performances.

44 “But I also think that what the music means to me
45 doesn’t necessarily need to align exactly with what the music

46 | means to the other musicians or to the audience,” he said. “That
47 | ambiguity and flexibility is one of the reasons that music is so
48 | powerful.”

49 | In addition to directing the Concert Choir, Harvey is
50 | music director of the Brattleboro Camerata. He is also Associate
51 | Professor of Music and Director of Choirs at Fitchburg State
52 | University.

53 | Although Harvey enjoyed music all through elementary
54 | and secondary school, he didn’t set out to be a professional
55 | musician.

56 | “It was only as an undergraduate student that I started
57 | believing people who told me that music-making was something
58 | I should consider pursuing as a career,” he said. “By the time I
59 | finished undergrad, I had been a teaching assistant for both
60 | orchestras and choirs. I had won the college’s concerto
61 | competition and played the ‘Concerto in F Minor for Bass
62 | Tuba and Orchestra’ by Ralph Vaughan Williams. And I was
63 | headed to grad school in conducting. My fate was sealed.”

64 | Harvey has conducted all kinds of ensembles, but he
65 | finds the voice particularly interesting for two reasons.

66 | “First, the voice can carry text, which adds an entirely
67 | different and fascinating expressive layer to vocal music,” he said.
68 | “Second, voice is the ultimate egalitarian musical opportunity—
69 | almost everyone can sing, and your instrument is always with
70 | you.”

71 | According to the Brattleboro Music Center, more than 70
72 | years ago, violinist and conductor Blanche Moyse envisioned a
73 | community chorus of local voices performing celebrated choral
74 | music. She directed the group for decades. Susan Dedell became
75 | the choir’s music director in 1989. Harvey succeeded her in
76 | 2018. He founded the Brattleboro Camerata in 2021.

77 | “The difference between these two groups is primarily
78 | size and repertoire,” he said. “Concert Choir is a large group that
79 | sings music of many different styles, and has a tradition of high-
80 | quality performance of adventurous programs, often including

81 new music. For example, in our next concert, we'll be performing
82 music in four languages, across 400 years, and about half the
83 pieces are by living composers."

84 "Camerata, ~~on the other hand~~ in contrast, "is a smaller
85 group that specifically focuses on music from and inspired by the
86 Renaissance era," he said. "As a consequence, singers in
87 Camerata need to be relatively strong sight-readers and must be
88 comfortable holding their own part."

89 That's not to say, he added, that Concert Choir members
90 can't do that.

91 "Concert Choir is filled with tremendously accomplished
92 musicians," he said, "many of whom currently sing in Camerata
93 or have done so in the past."

94 The most complicated and important part of conducting
95 an ensemble, Harvey said, is helping the singers grow in their
96 understanding of the music.

97 "Some of this work is accomplished by the music itself,"
98 he said. "The pitches, rhythms, and syllables allow singers to
99 form their own personal relationship with a piece. I also provide
100 singers with an extensive set of resources, including practice
101 tracks, texts and translations, multiple recordings (if they exist),
102 and contextual information about the composer and the piece.

103 "Then throughout the rehearsal process, many
104 discussions of musical meaning take place," he said, "whether in
105 the form of brief one-on-one conversations, organized
106 discussions, or written communication. So I try to help, but I
107 don't feel the need to control the musicians's relationship with
108 the music. It's also an individual process for every singer."

109 As a choral conductor, Harvey operates from three core
110 values.

111 "I want the music to feel fresh and immediate, no matter
112 when or where it was written," he said. "I want the musicians to
113 feel safe to make mistakes and take risks. And I want the shared
114 humanity of all performers and audience members to be at the
115 center of my musical decisions. I'm always trying to do better."

116 While Harvey sees supporting local arts as an essential
117 act of citizenship and communal interdependence, his more
118 immediate goal for the audience at this concert is the experience
119 of hope.

120 | "Not a facile optimism," he said.

121 | -"A clear-eyed and hard-won sense that we as humans
122 are capable of addressing the challenges that we face together." _
123 Harvey added. "-Cumulatively and individually, I hope the
124 pieces on this concert help audience members process the
125 challenges and complexities of our current moment."

126 The Brattleboro Concert Choir, which is open to all
127 singers, seeks new members twice a year, and especially invites
128 BIPOC singers and singers of all gender identities. The spring
129 session begins Wednesday on Feb. 4. Interested singers should, as
130 soon as possible, contact the Brattleboro Music Center at 802-
131 257-4523 or at info@bmcvt.org.

132 Both Brooks Memorial Library and Putney Public Library
133 ~~have offer~~ two free passes to BMC concerts. Each pass allows two
134 persons to attend a concert ~~for free~~, with the requirement that
135 tickets be reserved at BMC a week in advance.

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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136 | ~~Nancy A. Olson is a freelance writer living in Putney.~~

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