

Ovation Festival Preview: Treble Choir centers around Ave Maria
By Amber Bills for The Exponent
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“Give me courage...Give me patience...Give me strength.” Jordan Saul, associate director of choral studies, said these are the three parts of Treble Choir’s April 14 concert called “Best Laid Plans.” Centered around three Ave Maria settings, Saul said this concert portrays a journey from hope, through a storm, and then to hope again.

Treble voices fill Fynette Kulas Hall as the choir rehearses for its last concert of the year. Saul said that the choir’s president conducts a piece every year. As Ciara Newman, senior and this year’s president, prepares to conduct a song, she reminds the group: “You don’t need to be religious to appreciate this text.” The choir then proceeds to sing the beginning of a hopeful Ave Maria.

The first Ave Maria setting portrays a new day which then turns into a storm. The second setting is about domestic challenges and includes an Ave Maria setting composed by Veronica Cator. The third setting will end the concert on a hopeful note, closing with “Don’t You Let Nobody Turn You ’Round.”

Saul said this piece is “basically saying when you come through all of these challenges, you learn who you are and you learn what’s important...And that’ll be the final musical statement that we make.”

Treble Choir’s performance at the Ohio Music Education Association Conference and a combined concert with Spelman College Glee Club limited rehearsal hours. The concert’s concept and name “Best Laid Plans” came from Saul’s frustration with her original plans for the concert falling through.

She said programming this concert was different from the usual because they needed repertoire they already knew that audiences hadn’t heard, while also adding songs they could learn by the concert “that still conveyed a story,” said Saul.

“Treble choir has become known as a choir that has something to say from the stage,” said Saul. “So we couldn’t just stand up and sing things that were pretty. They had to mean something to the choir as a whole so that we could really say something.”

Saul said that Treble Choir has used music to address societal issues ranging from gender roles to racism. She said that the choir’s ability to do this stems from the group’s atmosphere, which is “a place that is safe for [members] to be vulnerable and honest and open.”

“Conducting them is the absolute joy of my life,” said Saul. “Because they’re so giving and they’re so open, so they make me want to be better. I practice for them, because their time is so valuable and I want to use every moment of it to all of our best advantage and never take for granted what they’re bringing to the table every day.”

As Saul is conducting the last song of rehearsal, she tells the choir to “paint every sound intentionally.” The lessons she wants the ensemble to take away from their time in Treble Choir: “How you do anything is how you do everything; That to be excellent means making choices in every moment to use your skills and abilities to the best of your skill and ability level,” said Saul. “But even more than that, I think I would want them to remember that the world needs to hear what they have to say,” Saul said. “And that any time you go up against the status quo, you’re going to get pushback and don’t let that be a deterrent to sing louder, speak more fiercely. Believe in what you have to say. And make people hear you.”

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Hope for the best

The first time can be pretty nerve-wracking. You won’t really know what you’re doing, it’ll probably be awkward, and you’ll hope they won’t laugh. Unless you’re aspiring stand-up comedian, Hope Sloop. She said she officially started doing stand-up comedy this past summer, but she debates whether the stand-up she did as a high school senior counts as the first time.

“The first time I got a laugh is the first time,” said Hope.

Comedy is nothing without getting the audience to laugh, but Hope wants more than just to entertain a few people at an open mic. Her aspiration is to be a comedy writer for her own stand-up or for TV, and she’s on the path to making that happen. This year, Sloop joined her twin sister, Faith, at Baldwin Wallace as a sophomore transfer from Duquesne. Although she wants to graduate and have a fallback, Sloop is pursuing comedy in full force, changing her major from biology to broadcast and mass communications.

“I think every person that goes out for stand-up isn’t just doing it because it gives them joy. They definitely have an inflated ego and they think that they’re funny... Faith will even tell you that I have a big head, I have an inflated ego and people often think I’m—” she paused, searching for the right phrasing. “They call me *words*. We’ll just say they call me *words*,” she said. Words. That’s all they are to her.

Of course, these words aren’t of the sweet variety, and they’re usually not of the constructive criticism kind. But this is no sob story, and Hope is ensuring that it won’t be. She wears these “words” and her tough persona with a badge of honor, embracing the fact that she needs (and has) the grit to make it in comedy. In fact, one of Hope’s favorite quotes is Tina Fey’s popular line from Saturday Night Live, “B—es get stuff done.” And Hope Sloop is undoubtedly getting stuff done. She has already performed stand-up in New York, which is quite the start for a young comedian from the Midwest.

Armed with a full face of makeup (in hopes of not getting carded), her sister, and 3 minutes of material, she made her New York debut. Although a Lower East Side bar full of drunk patrons isn’t exactly Madison Square Garden, it’s definitely a start. And unlike her high school stand-up, the audience laughed this time.

“I think people were laughing a little bit ‘cause they were drunk. But I’ll take it, ya know?”

As Hope shows me to her dorm room, I notice the decorations on the outside of her door: A gravestone-shaped chalkboard that reads “R.I.P. my GPA” and Monsters Inc. nametags from the RA that say “Faith” and “Hope.” These sisters aren’t quite like Mike and Sully. Faith is a political science major—more of an Elle Woods. Hope, on the other hand, takes after Liz Lemon—a proudly cynical comedy writer.

“We can’t read each other’s minds, per se. But with subtitles we can read each other’s minds,” said Hope.

Hope enters the dorm room and Faith, writhing in misery, lifts her head just enough to look up and tell her, “I think I have the flu.”

To which Hope replies: “Well I just put in a Chipotle order, so get ready.”

As Hope puts on her riding boots and gets ready to go, Faith remains in bed, subject to her sister’s exasperated nagging for her to get ready to leave.

At this moment, I think back to what Hope said earlier that day about her role in the family: “I love my family so much. But I have five sisters and I’m the motherf—ing saint.”

When we finally get to Chipotle, the cashier calls out Hope’s name for her online order. Faith breaks in to correct them and says, “No, Faith and then Hope.” In another setting, maybe “Faith and then Hope” could pass as a proverb. But in this realm of burritos and guac, it’s clearly one of those moments in which the twin mindreading has gone awry and was definitely in need of subtitles.

“I submitted a bowl for you,” says Hope, re-correcting Faith. This Chipotle is witness to one of Hope’s acts of sisterly “motherf—ing saint”-hood. Despite the hour of appearing apathetic in dragging her ill sister out of bed for dinner and a movie, Hope bought her dinner without even mentioning it.

“I submitted my own bowl,” says Faith.

“What the hell, dude?” says Hope.

“How was I supposed to know? You usually never think about anybody but yourself,” Faith says, stating it as a fact, rather than accusing.

Unoffended, with a smirk that captures self-acceptance and a hint of pride, Hope replies,

“You’re not wrong.”

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BW's Our Town redefines the American classic

This October, Baldwin Wallace Theatre & Dance takes the audience to the fictional yet relatable small town of Grover's Corners in its production of *Our Town*. Thornton Wilder's classic play is narrated by the Stage Manager character, who tells the stories of the Gibbs and Webb families from 1901 to 1913. BW's production aims to transcend early 20th century New Hampshire to make this classic more relatable to today's America.

"We're divided in this country more than we ever have been for many reasons," said BW theatre professor and *Our Town* Director, Scott Plate. "After the election, I realized that 'We the People' looked very different in 2017 than it looked in 1937," said Plate.

Colorblind casting played a major role in embracing this change and making the show more relatable in 2017. Actors weren't chosen based on race, but rather, regardless of race, in hopes that the cast would reflect modern America. *Our Town*'s early 20th century origins have led to it being perceived as a typically white show, but Plate wanted to reject that interpretation. He explained, "I wanted to take what's considered to be a prototypically American classic and make it an American classic."

BW Theatre & Dance, as well as BW as a whole, has been making efforts to further embrace diversity. Plate described his own goal within this initiative, saying, "What I hope to do is create a place where students of all colors get out of here expecting more of the world."

Our Town's simple yet intentional set design ties into the themes of the show. The main part of the set is white, but everything onstage is in color. Plate explained his inspiration for the set, saying, "That feels like America to me today... White is the standard against which everything else is defined. And my hope was to look at this play in light of the fact that that wasn't true anymore."

The set design and staging are based on the Flower of Life, a sacred geometry web that represents the intertwined nature of existence. As the characters get caught up in their patterns of movement, it becomes clear that they're missing the larger picture. This simplification of the human experience is central to the theme of *Our Town*, especially in this modern production.

The minimalistic set and lack of props leave the cast pantomiming with imaginary objects, an element that is customary to *Our Town*. Grant Strlich-Waybright, who plays Howie Newsome, said that getting to build this world with the other actors was one of the best parts of working on the show. The bareness of the set gives the audience the ability to both put themselves into the story, while also providing a perspective of life from a distance.

Our Town runs Oct. 4-8 in the Black Box Theatre at Kleist Center for Art and Drama. For tickets, order online at bw.edu/events/theatre-dance or contact the box office: (440) 826-2240.