

Singers Club of Cleveland to take its May program on tour to the Baltics

by Daniel Hathaway



One of Northeast Ohio's oldest continuing ensembles, The Singers Club of Cleveland, made its debut in the chapel of First Baptist Church on April 19, 1894.

The all-male chorus, which had tallied up 1,663 members by the time its entry in *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland*

History was written in 1995, will return to First Baptist Church for a spring concert on Friday, April 28 at 7:30 pm — not to the edifice where the chorus sang its first concert, but to its new Gothic building designed by Walker and Weeks and dedicated in 1929.

Friday's concert will also set the distinguished ensemble off on a new course. Having stayed close to home for over a century, the Singers Club will embark on a week-long tour of Latvia, Estonia, and Finland in June.

“We're going to be there during the Summer Solstice, which is a huge celebration in the Baltics,” music director Don Verkuilen said in a telephone conversation. “Some time ago, the Club sang in Washington D.C., which is the furthest they had ever traveled. I thought that if we were going to tour internationally we should start with something easy like Canada, but then this opportunity came up.

“There's a gentleman I know who was my choir director when I was a soprano in a men and boys choir in Appleton, Wisconsin. He and a couple of other folk started this festival called the Festival of Three. Every year, they take three choirs to tour three countries. The whole goal behind it is not just to tour, but to partner with local choirs and build international relationships between musical ensembles. For example, there's a men's

chorus in Estonia that we're going to partner with and sing together while we're there. Then we're going to reverse it next year, so the partner choirs we sang with in Europe will come to the United States. Plans aren't 100 % solidified yet, but in 2024 we will host one of those concerts in Cleveland," Verkuilen said.

Friday's concert, *The Sun of Hope*, will preview the Club's programs in the Baltics. "It makes a nod to the longest day of the year, and to what the sun represents," Verkuilen said. "We started thinking about the repertoire on a bitter cold day in January. Later on the sun came out, and that just changes your whole day. What the sun can do is to bring hope to so many people, and we've built the program around that theme. It's pretty diverse in style, and all the pieces have texts that look at light in different ways. With the times we're living in, we all could use a little extra hope."



Verkuilen, who happens to be the recently-appointed music director at the First Baptist Church of Greater Cleveland, finds that this chorus offers its members more than just an opportunity to sing. "One thing I love about the Singers Club of Cleveland is that it's like a big family. There's definitely a social aspect to this group. We have a Ukrainian member who fled — or moved — to Cleveland, and he's gotten a ton of support from us. We have 5-6 lawyers in our choir, so they've been helping him find some work."

The forthcoming tour will be self-funded. "I could see us doing an international tour every three years in the future," Verkuilen said. "Not only is it good for the choir, but it's good for marketing and drawing people in to sing with us. And for fundraising purposes, it's not a bad idea to have a bunch of lawyers in the club."

Verkuilen is also an organist who will be playing several recitals during the tour. He holds organ and harpsichord degrees from Oberlin and the Cleveland Institute of Music, and is about to begin a doctoral program at Case. "I've been converted to the dark side of historical performance," he quipped.

Perhaps that goes along with his interest in restoring — and driving — Model T Fords, a sideline which has been highlighted in a story on Cleveland's [News Channel 5](#). He's also been active as an organ builder, something he'll need to cut back on as his academic and performing activities increase. "My career gets more interesting every year," he said.

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