

Oberlin's Artist Recital Series Sets the Stage for a Gospel Experience

by Stephanie Manning

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Trey McLaughlin & The Sounds of Zamar blur the boundaries of genre with contemporary gospel arrangements. Their latest tour, "The Zamar Experience," arrives in Oberlin February 10 for a community workshop and concert on the Artist Recital Series in Finney Chapel.

For Trey McLaughlin, each and every rehearsal is the creation of something special.

"It's where the magic first happens, you know," says the vocalist and director. "It's that moment where you're starting a new piece and you're starting to hear what it could be."

For McLaughlin, who has been singing since age four, his love for rehearsing started early. "I would line up my mom's perfume bottles on her dresser, or my toys, or anything that would stand, and I would have choir rehearsal," he says. A CD recording would

serve as the finished product. But that was almost an afterthought—his favorite part was the teaching.

The singer and arranger is leading plenty of rehearsals these days thanks in part to his touring group, [Trey McLaughlin & The Sounds of Zamar](#). The contemporary gospel choir will take their latest show around the U.S. and Canada this February, stopping in Oberlin for the first time. [Their February 10 performance](#) in Finney Chapel is part of the [2023-24 Artist Recital Series](#).



A classically-trained baritone and vocal pedagogue, McLaughlin moved back to his hometown of Augusta, Georgia after earning his Bachelor of Music from Columbus State University. Returning to the gospel genre that has shaped him since childhood, he first created The Sounds of Zamar from the group of friends who would come with him to his singing gigs.

McLaughlin says the choir’s performances offer “a little bit of everything,” with takes on gospel, pop, R&B, and particularly musical theater. McLaughlin creates all the arrangements and has also composed a few original songs.

Their Oberlin program will include some new additions to the musical theater section, which already features “Dear Theodosia” from *Hamilton* and a mashup from *Dear Evan Hansen*. Also on the docket is one of McLaughlin’s recent compositions—an

Afro-Caribbean-influenced song called “Worthy.”

One selection guaranteed, no matter where they go, is the group’s cover of [“Better Is One Day,”](#) which catapulted McLaughlin and his singers to viral fame back in 2014. But that video might never have made it to YouTube without some necessary encouragement.

“I didn’t think the video was good enough. I didn’t feel like vocally it was our best,” McLaughlin shares. But his singers persuaded him to post it anyway, creating Zamar’s breakout hit.

“It just goes to prove that you never know what people are going to like and what they're going to gravitate towards,” he says. “Sometimes, what you may not feel like is your best is meaningful to other people. It has worth and it has value.”



While in Oberlin, the group will also host a [Community Gospel Singing Workshop](#), which is free and open to the public, as well as a guest master class with the students of the Oberlin Gospel Choir. McLaughlin says activities like these are key to fostering the sense of community inherent in this style of music. “It's not a performer versus audience relationship. It is a communal relationship.”

As a teacher, he describes himself as a happy medium between the stereotypical tyrants or the pushovers. “Choir directors are notoriously not very nice, right? At least, not in a rehearsal setting. I can be like that—trust and believe,” he laughs, “but for the most part, my style of directing is more about encouraging people to give me their best, rather than berating them for not.”

Ultimately, McLaughlin’s love for rehearsing will prevail with virtually any group. “Watching their eyes light up when you first bring all the voices together and they can hear how the harmonies work out and how the parts fit together...it's great,” beams McLaughlin.

This year is Zamar’s 15th anniversary, and while McLaughlin is amazed by everything the group has accomplished, he says he’s confident “the greatest things are still yet to

come.” What started as six singers from Augusta has grown into around 24 active members, many of whom now live all over the country.



“It's like singing with your family,” McLaughlin says. “A lot of us have been together for a while. And we don't always get along, but our voices love each other. I think what we create together is greater than our need to be at odds.”

Concert tickets are available [online](#) and by phone at 800-371-0178. Patrons may also purchase them in person between noon and 5 pm, Monday through Friday, at Oberlin College's Central Ticket Service, located at 67 N. Main Street, in the lobby of the Eric Baker Nord Performing Arts Complex.

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