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Amman forms Planet Earth Singers to celebrate the music of the world

By John Carlson



"The idea was to begin to gather people of all racial and cultural backgrounds to enjoy music and appreciate each others' cultural backgrounds," says Doug Amman (shown above). (Photo by Kyle Evans, *The Star Press*)

World music. If that sounds like a perfect fit for a choral group named the Planet Earth Singers, you're right in tune with Doug Amman's beliefs.

"The music that we do is mostly multicultural," said the group's founder and conductor, who graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 1961. "We emphasize that."

As he spoke in his office at College Avenue United Methodist Church in Muncie, Ind., where he serves as music director, Amman waved a piece of sheet music in the air, then briefly turned his attention to a matched set of congas.

"It's a Caribbean song," he said of the piece, palming a simple rhythm on the drums. "But we still do some classical, too."

In fact, the Planet Earth Singers perform in many styles. That's exactly what Amman had in mind when he formed the group back in 2004, after retiring as Ball State University's director of choral activity following some 22 years there.

He majored in music at Illinois Wesleyan, later receiving a doctorate with a concentration in conducting from the Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati. Both he and his wife, Jean (White) Amman '63, also taught at Northern Michigan University before moving to Muncie. Jean continues to work at Ball State as assistant to the provost.

The Amman family includes six children, two of them adopted. "We're a multicultural family," said Amman with a smile.

He is a large man with a shock of whitish-gray hair, and enjoys golfing when he gets the opportunity. You needn't spend much time in his company, however, to learn that exploring diversity in all its musical forms is his commanding interest.

"The idea was to begin to gather people of all racial and cultural backgrounds," he said, "to enjoy music and appreciate each others' cultural backgrounds. ... There's a lot of mixing. It's kind of neat."

Attend a concert, he noted, and you're liable to hear numbers presented in Japanese, Spanish, even Hebrew.

The choral group's first year, he worked hard to recruit a group of racially diverse singers and wound up with 22. During the group's second, third and fourth years, that number climbed to 33, 38 and 42, respectively. This year?

"This year we're sure we're going to hit 50," Amman predicted, noting the group's ranks includes singers from neighboring communities several miles away. "The word has kind of gotten out. ... These are people who really like the idea of a group like this."

He hopes the growth continues, to a point. "Seventy-five to 80 singers would be super," he said.

The Planet Earth Singers practice in College Avenue United Methodist Church. Their three main concerts, however, all take place at Muncie's Cornerstone Center for the Arts, and are scheduled in December, February and April.

While Planet Earth Singers attracts vocalists with different levels of skill and experience, the inclusion of Ball State vocal students and some members of the local choral group Masterworks Chorale benefits the less-tested members.

Besides no auditions, there are also no charges to attend the concerts. "That's another thing that's unique," he said. "The concerts are free, so people of all incomes can afford to attend them."

Amman's considerable efforts are voluntarily provided. In addition, the group gets grants from the Indiana Arts Council and the Community Foundation of Muncie-Delaware County. Furthermore, members pay a modest membership fee to join.

Paying to sing? With this group, it works.

"Music is something that can pull people together," Amman said of the members. "They love the music. They love the idea of it. They want to share."

Sharing is something the singers do with their audiences, he said, but it is also something they do between themselves. Each practice session includes time set aside for members to socialize.

"I think the music becomes more passionate," Amman said, "when you know who you're singing with."

In May, the ensemble will embark on a "Choral Relief Tour" through poverty-stricken regions of Kentucky and the two hurricane-devastated cities of New Orleans and Galveston, Texas. "There will be concerts in churches but members of the tour will also do some Habitat for Humanity building work as well as other service and volunteer projects," Amman said.

The tour will also include vocalists from College Avenue United Methodist, as well as students from Ball State University. Amman invites anyone interested in singing and/or helping with volunteer work to contact him at damman@bsu.edu or (765) 282-2188. "It would be nice to have some alumni of Illinois Wesleyan join us," he said.

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