



Spring 4-20-2009

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Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel, "A Touch of Class Brings Melody to Evelyn Chapel Saturday ; Web Story" (2009). *News and Events*. 5616.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/5616>

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April 20, 2009

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A Touch of Class Brings Melody to Evelyn Chapel Saturday

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – A beautiful melody soars through the air of a room in Presser Hall on the campus of Illinois Wesleyan University. The rise and fall of notes emanate not from handheld instruments, but a group of dynamic women surrounding a grand piano. As their voices swell into a powerful end, smiles spread across the faces of the women who realize they have yet again captured a moment with song.

These women are the 11 Illinois Wesleyan students who make up the a cappella group A Touch of Class. The group will have its final public performance of the semester at A Touch of Class Spring Concert at 8 p.m. on Saturday, April 25, at Evelyn Chapel (1301 N. Park Street, Bloomington). The event is free and open to the public.

“It’s when we hit those notes, that I really realize what this group is,” said Susan Rapp, a junior music and interdisciplinary education major from Schaumburg, Ill. “This is a celebration of music, and not just for music majors, but for everyone. This is my chance to share my love of music with everyone.”

A Touch of Class began several years ago at Illinois Wesleyan, but has come into its own in the last two or three years, said faculty advisor Associate Professor of Voice Carren Moham. “In the beginning, it was a group of friends who liked to sing, but rarely challenged each other,” said Moham. “There is a musicmanship that has evolved from this group, which has elevated not only their music, but their recognition in the community.”

A growing fan base has led to packed houses for the group. In February, a crowd filled Evelyn Chapel to send A Touch of Class off to compete in the prestigious International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella in St. Louis, Mo. “The great thing about this group is the variety of songs we sing,” said Jordan Pettis, a first-year international studies and violin performance double major from Denver, Colo. “We sing songs people recognize, know from the radio or growing up, and it touches them.”

The songs in A Touch of Class’ repertoire can range from a 1950s tune like Bobby Day’s “Rockin’ Robin” to a contemporary songs like Anna Nalick’s “Breathe, 2 a.m.,” all reworked for

a cappella. The women believe it is important to tailor a variety of songs for their audiences. “We could be performing for the senior dinner on campus one week, and a group of retired ministers the next,” said senior Laura Murray, an art major from Bloomington. “It works best if we can offer a variety of genres and styles to include everyone.”

Senior Stephanie Zimny, an elementary education major from Park Ridge, Ill., jokingly refers to reworking accompaniments as “a capellizing” them. “It’s incredible to discover how far we can take a song,” she said.

Almost all of the members of the group have explored arranging music for A Touch of Class. “It takes a while when we arrange the songs ourselves,” said Leah Bauersfeld, a sophomore from McLean, Ill., who spent the summer arranging the Nalick song. “You never know what will happen or how the song will fit our voices until you begin to sing it.”

Singing in the practice classroom of Presser, the women transform Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ on a Prayer” from a pop hit into a tune that has invoked goose bumps in audience members. “We made it a girl power ballad,” said Murray with a laugh. Many of the women profess a feeling of empowerment from singing with A Touch of Class. “It’s great to hear our blend of voices and know we have a range as great as many co-ed groups,” said Rapp. “There is such a passion for music.”

That passion will continue. Auditions for A Touch of Class are held every fall. “Do you know what I will miss most?” asked senior Andrea Ambrosia, a music education major from Riverside, Ill. “I will miss those last few notes, when it seems like everyone holds their breath.” Ambrosia and the other seniors will have one more chance for that harmonious moment this Saturday.