



Photo special to the COURIER

The Mt. SAC Chamber Singers celebrate after recently being named the "Choir of the World" during the 61st Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod in Llangollen, Wales.

Local chamber singers receive world recognition

It was a competition in which 55 of the best choirs in the world came together for an ultimate showdown in Llangollen, Wales—a competition in which Mt. San Antonio College shined the brightest on a prestigious stage.

The 61st Uanngollen International Musical Eisteddfod took place from July 10-15 and during the event, the Mt SAC Chamber Singers voiced record-breaking performances that served as complimenting accolades to their biggest honor yet—being named the "Choir of the World."

"It was pretty exciting stuff," said Bruce Rogers, Mt SAC choral director. "For me, it's thrilling to see the students win. I really wanted the title for the students because they worked so hard."

Not only did the Mt SAC ensemble win the "Choir of the World" title, but the group also won first place in 3 different musical categories in record fashion, singing a variety of music that included sacred songs, secular music, folk songs and traditional spirituals. Youth choir, folk song choir and mixed choir were the categories the chambers singers were victorious in.

The Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod became a summer tradition within the Welsh town in 1947. Presently, between 2000 and 5000 competitors along with nearly 50,000 visitors are part of the weeklong event that features more than 20 competitions and a chance for competitors to share the stage with professional artists during evening concerts. The competitors are of mixture of community, school and recreational groups.

"You have to audition in order to be accepted," Mr. Rogers explained. "Reputation also plays a role in that you have to have an international reputation in order to

compete. Another thing is that you can't be a professional group that is doing this for a living."

Each year, the international competition not only attracts various groups from around the globe but also attracts the attention of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), who provides live television coverage of the event as it happens. Inside the Royal International Pavilion venue, more than 5000 spectators can gather to view the competition.

Along with competing, the Mt. SAC singers also performed 4 of their winning selections—Zdenek Lukas' "Die irae," Eric Whitacre's "Lux awumque," Sydney Guillaume's "Kalinda," and the traditional spiritual "Way Over in Beulah Lan"—before a BBC nationally televised audience.

"There were cameras everywhere," said Kevin Shannon, who has been a member of the Mt. SAC Chamber Singers for two years and is a Bonita High School graduate. "It was one of the most intense times in my life. When they announced us as the 'Choir of the World' winner, we just went crazy. We definitely got a lot of respect when we were over there."

The Uanngollen competition was the latest in a string of international competitions that the local chamber singers have participated in since Mr. Rogers took over the program in 1994. The group won second place at the 2000 International Eisteddfod Choral Festival, won the Grand Prix Varna International Choir Competition in Bulgaria in 2003 and competed in the Grand Prix International Choir Competition in Italy in 2004.

Before competing at Eisteddfod, the Mt. SAC ensemble had received first- and second-place honors at the 44th Spittal International Choir Competition in Austria. Yet for chamber singer Caitlin Beale, also a graduate of Bonita High School, it was the group's time in Uanngollen that remains fresh in her mind. "It was an amazing experience," she said. "We got

there and got to be in a parade where the whole town shuts down to introduce the competition. People were lining the streets cheering and there were pictures of the different competitors posted in the stores. So many different countries were represented and that was neat to see."

The current number of members in Mt. SAC's Chamber Singers is 34 and still growing. The school also has a total of 6 choirs presently, versus having just two in the past.

According to Mr. Rogers, the success of the group is based on the work that the students put in as well as the close-knit nature of the singers. With those aspects in place, the choral director looks to supply the motivation that then pushes the group to the next level.

"It takes lots and lots of work and dedication. They care about music and about each other," Mr. Rogers said. "To motivate them, I treat them like a sports team, pumping them up and just spending a lot of time with them."

Though the group officially will meet on Thesdays, Thursdays and Fridays for 2-hour time slots, the students will also meet with each other outside of class time in order to further practice their songs and also socialize.

"We're like a family," Mr. Shannon said. "Sometimes you'll have chamber singer groups that have cliques but we don't have that within our group. We hang out a lot together."

Ms. Beale shares Mr. Shannon's sentiments and also is appreciative of the nurturing environment that Mr. Rogers sets up for his students as choral director.

"This is the most amazing choir I've been in," Ms. Beale said. "Mr. Rogers has the ability to create such a great environment where we have fun and we really can believe in and feel the music that we make."

- Landus Rigby