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Harry Pickens Sets Wendell Berry Poems to Song for Louisville's Voces Novae

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Inside a rehearsal room at Highlands Presbyterian Church, Voces Novae conductor Frank Heller leads his singers through a song based on a Wendell Berry poem while composer Harry Pickens accompanies them on piano. Pickens has adapted ten Berry poems for choral performance for the ensemble's season opener, "I Go Among Trees."

"If you focus on the text, then the music will illumine the text. The music is never more important than the text," Heller tells his singers.

Even the composer agrees: Pickens says in this kind of adaptation work, a composer's greatest challenge is not overwhelming the poet's words. He gives Berry's poem "October Tenth" as an example.

"The first line of the poem, the poem goes 'Now constantly there is the sound quieter than rain of the leaves falling,'" says Pickens. "That sound that's almost silent. I took that phrase and memorized it and went out into Cherokee Park and listened to the leaves fall, and invited those ideas to emerge in music."

Voces Novae performs "I Go Among Trees" [Sunday at Church of the Ascension on Lynnbrook Drive \(http://www.voces-novae.org/concert-information/\)](http://www.voces-novae.org/concert-information/).

WFPL's Erin Keane goes inside a Voces Novae rehearsal.

This is the second time Pickens and Voces Novae have worked together on a Wendell Berry performance. Pickens calls these collaborations "a love affair of music and words."

"Wendell's sensibility to the miracle of being a human being and the connection with the divine, and connection with family and earth and land and all that is something that inspires me deeply," he says.

Now entering its 21st season, Louisville's Voces Novae is a semi-professional community choir dedicated to performing music by living American composers. Heller says working with living American composers like Pickens on original work helps the group evolve along with the contemporary musical landscape.

"There's an element of what's going on in the world in that music, because of the text that people pick to set," says Heller.

Like Berry's poems, which emphasize close ties to nature, especially rural conservation and farm-to-table food economies, and a return to close-knit communities. Heller recognizes that Berry's clearly-articulated philosophies resonate far and wide.

"And then you couple with that one of the angelic living souls on the earth in Harry Pickens, and they fit so well together," says Heller. "It's so exciting to see these two contemporaries working together, hand in hand, and we're the beneficiaries of that."

That emphasis on community and collaboration is a thread that runs through the choral experience. Heller says a Voces Novae singer isn't just another pretty voice.

"I want people who are willing to open their hearts to the music and look for things that are deep within, that they can bring and present and share with other people," he says.

Like Patricia Walker FitzGerald, a family court judge who has been performing with Voces Novae for sixteen years. For FitzGerald, singing is a release from her daily work and stress. She gives a lot of the credit to Heller.

"He brings us together not only as singers, but as a community," says FitzGerald. "He helps us to sing the essence of the music, and he brings a joy to it that he teaches us to share with those who come."

FitzGerald remembers fondly Berry's presence in the audience during the ensemble's first Pickens/Berry collaboration, and she says performing Berry's poems is an honor. She also appreciates how his writing also helps her to slow down and reconnect.

"He brings a contemplative, quiet, but joyous presence that ties us back to the earth and to things that are important," she says.



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