

BLOOMINGTON chamber singers
present



THE DIARY OF
ANNE FRANK
Set to Music



By Elisabeth Andrews ✍️ 📷 Shannon Zahnle

The story of Anne Frank is well known — her wartime diary, written as an adolescent while her family hid from Nazi forces in Amsterdam, is among the world's most widely read works of nonfiction. Many American students first encounter the book in middle-school literature classes, and *The Diary of a Young Girl* has been the subject of numerous dramatic works including a 1997 adaptation performed in 2008 by Bloomington's Cardinal Stage Company.

As familiar as the story may be, Bloomington Chamber Singers Music Director Gerald Sousa believes a new window into Anne's experience can be opened through music. On April 12 and 13, the ensemble will present *Annelies*, a setting of the diary text for choir and a soprano soloist accompanied by a violin, cello, piano, and clarinet quartet.

"I think a musical piece can offer a visceral experience that gives the story a real immediacy," says Sousa. "The music is accessible. It allows you to get close to it."

Taking Anne's full first name as its title, the 69-minute work combines an original score completed in 2009 by Grammy-nominated British composer James Whitbourn and a libretto that Scottish author and poet Melanie Challenger compiled directly from the diary entries.

Like the book, *Annelies* chronicles Anne's two years in hiding from July of 1942 until her family's capture in August of 1944. The musical work adds a section drawn from historical records and Old Testament verses to represent Anne's detainment and the several months she spent in concentration camps before dying of typhus at age 15.

The Bloomington Chamber Singers gather in a warehouse on South Rogers Street for their first rehearsal of *Annelies*.



Music Director Gerald Sousa conducts the group. The music offers a “visceral” experience of Anne Frank’s story, he says.

THE

piece traverses a vast landscape of emotion, from terror, anger, and restlessness to gratitude, courage, and hope. Whitbourn’s score is melodic, haunting, and at times representational, mimicking a chiming clock tower or soldiers’ boots on the stairs.

The libretto, which Sousa plans to project as supertitles, demonstrates the enduring strength and intensity of Anne’s writing. The choir sings of the “eight pounding hearts” of those in hiding and the soloist describes feeling “like a songbird, whose wings have been ripped off and who keeps hurling itself against the bars of its dark cage.”

To create an immersive experience for the audience, Sousa chose a warehouse at 1525 S. Rogers St. as the performance venue. He hopes the austere space will evoke a sense of dislocation. “I wanted to stage this piece in an environment where people can feel something of Anne’s discomfort,” he says.

Projection screens will provide further context by displaying images of Anne and the secret annex in which she hid. The 50 singers will share a small, temporarily

constructed stage with the four instrumentalists.

“The whole thing has the ambience of being very contained,” Sousa says.

Still in development are plans to involve other community organizations in programming, such as an art exhibition outside the performance space and presentations tailored to school groups.

Sousa’s hope, also expressed by several members of the Bloomington Chamber Singers, is that the performance can catalyze a community-wide occasion of remembrance.

“We are really hoping to see people who don’t ordinarily come to choral concerts and are drawn by the subject matter,” says singer Lisa Kurz, a principal instructional consultant at Indiana University’s Center for

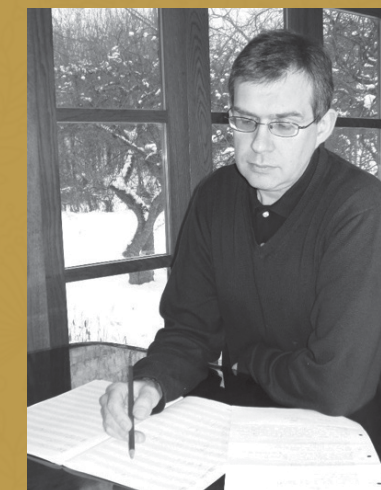
Innovative Teaching and Learning. “This is beautiful and powerful music and I think the audience will have a meaningful emotional experience listening to it.”

Singer Lynn Schwartzberg, a food writer for *The Herald-Times*, describes the *Annelies* concert as an opportunity for Bloomington to experience choral music as an interpretive medium. “As a society, we are very accustomed to interpreting events through literature and theater, but less so through music. I’m hoping this will be a chance to demonstrate what the community can share through a choral performance,” she says.

The concert also could inspire exploration of the larger historical context of the persecution Anne’s family experienced, notes singer Russell Lyons,



An Interview with ‘Annelies’ Composer
JAMES WHITBOURN



Courtesy photo

BLOOM What do you hope the Bloomington audience will gain from the performance?

Whitbourn I hope they’ll come away with a feeling of the person, and not just of what she represents. This piece is a portrait in music of this young girl.

When I was writing it, I got to meet people who knew her not as a symbol of the Holocaust but as a friend they used to go ice skating with or a little cousin they would babysit. I felt responsible to those people to make this a memorial for the individual.

I hope not only the audience but also the musicians in Bloomington will feel that through *Annelies* they have gotten to know Anne Frank better in a personal way.

BLOOM Where did the idea come from to set Anne Frank’s diary to music?

Whitbourn The librettist, Melanie Challenger, brought the idea to me. She had been working with children in Bosnia on a music project when Bosnia was in terrible internal conflict. She had seen healing effects from the music and wanted to do something similar with the diary.

Originally we assumed we could only use the story. The diary itself is a protected text in copyright, and putting

a professor of mathematics at IU. “I hope that we can partner with some local religious organizations to take an honest look at the history of anti-Semitism, which began long before the Holocaust and which continues to be alive in many parts of the world today,” he says.

The tragic nature of the story, however, is only one aspect of what the group hopes to convey. For singer Ruth Sanders, a retired researcher with the IU School of Medicine, the story’s sorrow is ultimately eclipsed by Anne’s belief in a transcendent good.

“It’s not sad music. It’s beautiful music. It ends on a note of hope,” she says. ✨

Anne Frank wrote about her experiences in a red-and-white plaid autograph book. The libretto for *Annelies* comes directly from the diary entries. Courtesy photo



it to music had not been permitted before. After a long series of discussions with the custodians we were granted permission, which was incredible.

BLOOM Given that the story is so widely known, what can be gained from a musical adaptation?

Whitbourn One thing that comes from a musical piece is that it allows a whole community to come together in an act of remembrance simultaneously. A musical piece only exists if real people make it exist. When it’s a community of people creating that music, as it is with a choir, the audience picks up on what the choir is feeling.

One of the big surprises for me was that the piece has been done several times already in Germany. I’ve received letters from people saying the performances allowed descendants of both sides of the Holocaust to come together. It has created a very hopeful focus.

BLOOM Who did you originally have in mind as the audience?

Whitbourn The very original idea was that it should be a work for children. That was quickly broadened out. The goal was that this piece should not exclude people on the grounds of their age, or their musical experience, or their musical taste.

