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A lifetime of music; Smith College Alumnae Chorus to honor composer Alice Parker, class of 1947, in special concert

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Who says your time singing in college has to end with graduation?

For members of the Smith College Alumnae Chorus, launched four years ago, choral music remains a means for forging connections among graduates of different classes and keeping their voices raised in song.

For Alice Parker, Smith class of 1947, choral music has been a lifelong calling — as a composer, a conductor and teacher. Parker, 88, has composed for decades, earning particular notice for her arrangements of folk songs and hymns for vocal ensembles. She collaborated for years on such material with the late Robert Shaw, known as “the Dean of American Choral Conductors.”

On Sunday, Sept. 21, Parker and the Alumnae Chorus (SCAC) will join forces at Smith to celebrate Parker’s lifetime achievements in a 2 p.m. show at Sweeney Concert Hall. Part of the performance, which will be conducted by Parker, has a special connection to the Valley as well: Parker will lead the chorus in a rendition of her song cycle “Three Seas,” a suite based on the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

Members of the SCAS, most of whom performed with one of more vocals groups at Smith when they were students, say the opportunity to work with Parker is an exciting one.

“It’s really an honor,” Sarah Muffly, class of 2008 and the chorus’ secretary, said in a recent phone call from her home in the New York area. “What she’s accomplished musically is a real inspiration for all of us.”

Parker, who lives in Hawley, says she’s also thrilled to return to Smith and to work with the college’s alums.

“This is really an exceptional club, highly trained and motivated,” she said during a phone call from her home. “I think it will be a good experience.”

For the SCAS, the upcoming concert is the latest engagement in a history that’s fairly brief but has had some memorable moments. The group, which was slowly pieced together in the mid-2000s, had its official debut at Smith in 2010 in honor of the 125th anniversary of the college’s Glee Club. Members toured Sicily the following year and in 2013 journeyed to the Baltic states, Finland, and then St. Petersburg, Russia, to perform alongside national groups in Estonia and Russia.

Muffly, who sang in the Glee Club and the College Chorus when she was at Smith, said SCAS may conduct another international tour in 2016, as well as perform at the college next year. In the meantime, the group, whose members range in age from the about 26 to over 70, is looking to increase its membership; about 70 members went on the Baltic tour last year, she notes.

“We all have careers and other things going on in our lives, but people are really committed to the group,” added Muffly, who is soon moving to Haiti as part of a fellowship to work with the Haitian Ministry of Education. She’s been singing with a choral group in New York and hopes to join a choir in Haiti once she settles in.

Jonathan Hirsch, the longtime director of choral and orchestral music at Smith, is also the musical director of the Alumnae Chorus. He says he encouraged former students to develop the group, noting that relatively few universities and colleges have one — Yale University’s Alumni Chorus may be the most well-known group — even though a singing group of alums gives members a good musical outlet and means for maintaining school ties.

“There are a lot of community choruses around the country, and it may be that [former choral students] find it easier to join a local group,” Hirsh said during a phone call. “It’s a lot of work to organize and keep an alumni chorus together — it’s an all-volunteer effort.”

Given that, he gives high marks to current officers of the SCAS like Muffly: “They’ve really done a great job in putting it together.”

‘You know her name’

Hirsh will conduct part of the Sept. 21 concert, which will feature selections from “Folk Songs of the Four Seasons,” a song cycle by Ralph Vaughan Williams, a legendary British composer from the late 1800s to mid 1900s. Like Parker, Williams drew on ballads and hymns as inspiration for many of his own compositions.

“We thought that would make for a good complement to Alice’s music,” Hirsh said.

Hirsh has previously commissioned Parker to write music for some of Smith’s campus vocal groups, including a Christmas Vespers performance by the Glee Club about five years ago that earned the group an invitation to perform at Yale University. He also brought Parker to campus as the keynote speaker at a musical symposium at Smith the year before that.

“If you study choral music ... you know her name,” he said. “I had learned of her work before I even realized she was a Smith graduate.”

Parker, born in Boston in 1925, majored in music performance and composition at Smith and went on to earn a master’s degree in choral conducting at the Juilliard School in New York City, where she studied with Robert Shaw. She lived in New York for years but often came to Hawley in the summer, she says, as her family had a second home there. She moved to Hawley permanently in 1996.

For years, Parker has worked independently, striking a balance between composing, conducting and teaching, though she considers herself first and foremost a composer. Her nationwide clients include church and college choirs, composers, music teachers and others. She has also composed instrumental music, such as for string quartets, and she directs a chamber vocal group, the Musicians of Melodious Accord, with whom she’s made several recordings.

Among a number of awards and honorary degrees she’s received for her contributions to music, Parker is a recipient of the Smith College Medal, an award the school gives to graduates whose work and lives “exemplify ... the true purpose of a liberal arts education,” according to the Smith College website.

“I’ve been so fortunate to be able to do what I love for so long,” she said.

In her work as a composer, Parker says, her goal is not so much setting words to music as giving those words a musical voice all their own. “I call it setting vowels and consonants to music,” she said. “I really want to recognize the value of the text.”

In her suite based on Emily Dickinson’s work, she’s taken three poems — “There is a solitude of space,” “As if the sea should part,” and “A soft sea washed around the house” — that in her view form a natural beginning, middle and end of lyrical expression. Though the poems, like most of Dickinson’s works, are very short, “The words are quite beautiful,” she said.

Parker will also lead the SCAS in a rendition of her composition “Incantations,” a piece based on

four poems by Elinor Wylie, the ethereal American poet and novelist of the early 1900s. Jerry Noble, the college pianist, and Smith junior Amanda Stout, a clarinetist, will accompany the chorus on these songs.

Coming together

Given that SCAS members live all over the country, the group cannot get together to rehearse until shortly before a performance; for the Sept. 21 concert, members received the sheet music in advance and have practiced on their own.

Though Parker says she has no qualms about working under those conditions — “I’m used to meeting groups on their own ground and coming in at the end of the process,” she said — Hirsh says it can require something of a “leap of faith” for a conductor to lead a concert with a group that’s had limited time to rehearse together.

“You’re assuming everyone has prepared, and in most cases they have,” he said. “But you have people with different levels of experience, different ages, and some may not have sung in years. It’s a little different than working with a group I regularly rehearse with, that I’ve trained, on campus.”

That said, Hirsh worked with some of the younger members of SCAS when they were at Smith, and he noted that the group performed very well during its Baltic tour last year. He says he’s learned as well to be more relaxed as a conductor, which in turn helps the chorus’ performance.

The SCAS will rehearse on Friday and Saturday, Sept. 19 and 20, for the Sept. 21 show, he noted, “and I think we’ll be fine.”

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The Sept. 21 concert with the Smith College Alumnae Chorus and Alice Parker takes places at 2 p.m. at Sweeney Concert Hall at Smith. Admission is free; donations are welcome.

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