

Seattle Girls Choir puts a new twist on a Christmas tradition

Nov. 26, 2024 at 6:00 am | Updated Nov. 26, 2024 at 6:00 am



Seattle Girls Choir performs “Lessons and Carols” in 2023. This year, the choir will perform “Readings & Carols,” with poetry instead of Bible verses, on Dec. 7. (Courtesy of Kenny Chen)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

Calling Christmas these days a secular holiday can be a good way to start a fight, but it is true that not everyone who celebrates is doing so with the birth of Jesus Christ in mind. For nonreligious families, Christmas can be an opportunity to celebrate peace, love and generosity toward others. Sarra S. Doyle, Seattle Girls Choir's artistic director, wanted to develop a winter concert that would make singers and audiences in [notably unreligious Seattle](#) feel welcome.

Offering a new twist on an old tradition, Seattle Girls Choir will present "Readings & Carols" on Dec. 7 at Seattle First Baptist Church. In this hourlong concert based on the "Lessons and Carols" holiday church service, young choristers will read poetry instead of Bible verses and will sing Christmas carols with professional singers from Byrd Ensemble.

The traditional "[Lessons and Carols](#)" was first performed on Christmas Eve 1918 at the King's College Anglican Church in Cambridge and has since been widely adopted by other churches. The carols can be hymns or popular holiday songs, but they are always thematically connected to the same nine scriptural readings that form the background of the religious service.

SGC's "Readings & Carols" program will be performed by its Allegra and Cantamus choirs, comprising 60 singers in the fifth through eighth grades. They will be joined by 12 members of Byrd Ensemble, with Susanna Valleau accompanying the combined choirs on the organ and piano.

"It starts with a solo from a young chorister and it's quite the cold open, I will say. She starts to sing all by herself, and then we all join in with her. And what follows is a series of alternating readings and carols," Doyle said.

"I think it offers something for everyone. There are, of course, going to be some secular poems about the winter season and the new year, but we also still have these traditional carols, and we have some poems that do focus more on Christmas itself. All we're doing is taking the framework of a long-standing musical tradition and making it a little bit more our own," she said.

Many local choirs perform "Lessons and Carols" concerts during the Christmas season.

"But to my knowledge we're the only group doing a 'Readings & Carols' featuring a diverse set of poets," said Doyle. She grew up singing "Lessons and Carols" in Seattle

Girls Choir, a nonprofit choir with an educational mission, founded by Jerome Wright in 1982.

“He was my director throughout my childhood. An amazing teacher, who had just a really incredible ability to pull the very best from his students,” said Doyle, who credits SGC with her decision to become a music educator. She joined the faculty 15 years ago and became the organization’s first woman artistic director three years ago. Since Wright’s tenure, the organization has grown to nearly 250 members from kindergarten through high school singing in eight different choirs. There are now women in both the artistic and executive director roles, and young women from the higher choir levels serve both on the board and as teaching assistants to the younger students.

“Lessons and Carols” had dropped out of the SGC repertory until Doyle began directing the Allegra choir in 2017. “It’s very musically accessible for a young singer. Christmas carols inherently are a little bit easier to learn than other types of choral music,” said Doyle.

When she brought “Lessons and Carols” back, she reached out to Markdavin Obenza, artistic director of the [Byrd Ensemble](#), where Doyle is a founding member. They formed an ongoing partnership that enables SGC students to perform with professionals.

“When we first did it in 2017, I will say the program felt very much like a church service,” said Doyle. “I think musically, that was an amazing experience for our kids. But not all of our families could engage super easily with that format.”

The choir doesn’t collect data on religious affiliation, but its students, drawn from Mill Creek, Federal Way and all communities in between, are diverse: Approximately 30% are youth of color, 23% have a physical disability or mental/behavioral health condition, and 12% are LGBTQ+.

After several years of incremental steps away from the format of a religious service, this year Doyle suggested replacing the scriptural lessons with a selection of readings that would be more appropriate to the diversity of the community she serves.

“This was a really fun process for me. I first selected the nine carols that I wanted us to sing. And then, from there, I did my best to find poems that were thematically related to the text in those nine carols,” she said. Most of the selected poets are American, and many of them are women and people of color. Doyle said the student response was overwhelmingly positive.

“It’s been really cool to see our choristers engage more with the readings. Their faces just lit up when I told them the poets are going to be Amanda Gorman and Langston Hughes and Robert Frost,” said Doyle. More than 30 students auditioned to present a reading. “These kids are obviously connecting with the poetry in different ways.”

Only one parent expressed any concern to Doyle over the change — they wanted to be sure that the thematic connection between the music and the readings was maintained, which was Doyle’s plan all along. She also maintained some of the traditional content. The opening solo comes from “Once in Royal David’s City,” the first song of the traditional “Lessons and Carols” service. And one of the readings is still biblical — the annunciation to the shepherds (Luke 2:8-20). It’s the same passage quoted by Linus in “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” here paired with David Willcocks’ arrangement of “Ding Dong! Merrily on High.” These are joined by less traditional choices like e.e. cummings’ poem “little tree,” paired with “O Tannenbaum.” To make it even more of a community experience, the audience will be invited to sing along to three additional, unpaired Christmas carols.

“The main motivation for making a change to this program was to better serve our families and help everyone feel connected to the program and not excluded. I just want everyone to enjoy it and feel good about it,” said Doyle.

“Readings & Carols”

5 p.m. Dec. 7; Seattle First Baptist Church, 1111 Harvard Ave., Seattle; 1 hour; venue is ADA compliant; \$25; seattlegirlschoir.org

Correction: This story has been updated to reflect that the reading from Luke 2:8-20 will be paired with David Willcocks’ arrangement of “Ding Dong! Merrily on High,” not John Rutter’s “Shepherd’s Pipe Carol.”

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Conservatory of Music, and the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation.

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