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Zia Singers' Winter Performance Focuses on Music Created by Women

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Artistic Director John Tiranno conducts the group of more than 50 vocalists with the Zia Singers community choral group (above) as the performers practice for their upcoming Voices of Life, Voices of Light winter concert at St. John's Methodist Church on Saturday, January 10, and Sunday, January 11.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

As Julie Kirk enjoyed a group rafting trip in the Grand Canyon in 2004, flanked by mile-high walls of caramel-colored rock, a fellow traveler asked if she'd provide aural accompaniment amid some of the most breathtaking art Mother Nature has to offer.

"It was a still area where the river was like glass, with these huge walls of stone around," she says.

"Whenever I'm in a resonant sort of space, I want to sing, because you can *hear* the space. The acoustics are just so scrumptious that you feel the echoes coming back to you, and it's almost like other voices from throughout the years are singing with you."

That is familiar terrain for the soprano; Kirk has sung alongside many voices throughout the years during a quarter-century tenure with Santa Fe women's choral group Zia Singers. This weekend, she and 52 other singers will perform the program *Voices of Life, Voices of Light*, featuring exclusively music written by women.

One of those women is Cecilia McDowall, whose 18-minute, five-movement work *Everyday Wonders: The Girl from Aleppo* serves as the show's centerpiece. *Everyday Wonders* sets text by British translator Kevin Crossley-Holland to music, relating the story of a Kurdish teenager with cerebral palsy who traveled more than 3,000 miles to Germany in a wheelchair, escaping civil war violence in her native Syria. The titular girl, Nujeen Mustafa, turned 27 on January 1; her tale is told in the 2016 book *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom*, which she co-wrote with U.S. journalist Christina Lamb.

Also showcased is "A Wave That Rocks Me," composed and arranged by Zia Singer Susan Anders. The piece's premiere comes five years after Anders released the album *13 Women*, featuring songs focused on famous American women. "A Wave That Rocks Me" is the 11th track and pays tribute to Edmonia Lewis, a 19th century mixed-race sculptor who eventually relocated to Europe to escape the smothering racism in her homeland.

The song's original version, which can be heard at sfnm.co/WaveThatRocksMe, features vocal harmonies but required a new arrangement to accommodate dozens of voices.

"When we started rehearsing, I almost had an out-of-body experience, because 53 women singing your piece is really, really fun," Anders says.

She relocated to the City Different in 2023 after a brief stop in Bend, Oregon, which offered much of the type of rugged beauty that abounds in Northern New Mexico but none of its artistic sensibility. Previously, she'd lived in Tennessee's largest city.



Artistic Director John Tiranno (above) conducts the group of more than 50 vocalists with the Zia Singers community choral group as the performers practice for their upcoming Voices of Life, Voices of Light winter concert at St. John's Methodist Church on Saturday, January 10, and Sunday, January 11.

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“The music community in Nashville is incredible,” Anders says. “However, [in Santa Fe], you get such diversity and cultural richness, as well as a very high level of musicianship for a town that’s under 100,000 people.”

Anders’ father gave her a guitar when she was 11, and her composer’s instincts kicked in quickly; she wrote a song that she now dismisses as “rather dreadful,” followed by more pieces in high school. She credits a guitar teacher for furthering her interest in music, as her mother and father were a quilter and a scientist, respectively.

Anders was inspired by the harmonies of Simon & Garfunkel growing up, and indeed, the sounds of silence fill her home.

“You would think that a lot of music would be played around the house,” she says. “My husband’s a musician too. I have friends who write in noisy coffeehouses, but I like a little bit more quiet, and Santa Fe is perfect for that. It is something I gravitate to; I’m an introvert.”

Santa Fe is an ideal home for Kirk as well, for different reasons.

“[My family] moved here in ’77, so I was in eighth grade,” she says. “My dad was in the Army before that, so we really didn’t have a home. We were moving every year or two; I think the longest we lived anywhere was 2½ years in [South] Korea. So when we moved here, I sunk down roots, hard and deep.”

Zia Singers, founded in 1993 by current Tri-M Productions Artistic Director Marilyn Barnes, is like a sisterhood — and Kirk had no trouble quickly connecting with other members.

“Because of the military, you never knew who was going to be moving,” she says of her childhood. “You’d go to school and meet some people, and then off they would go. So I can make friends in about 10 minutes.”

Artistic Director John Tiranno joined Zia Singers in mid-2024, replacing Aaron Howe. The Gonzales Community School teacher came across *Everyday Wonders: The Girl from Aleppo* while browsing in New York City in February.

“It was a pretty well-known book, of course,” he says, referring to *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen’s Escape from War to Freedom*. “When I found this, I thought, ‘Oh, this looks like a centerpiece for a concert.’”

Jeff Cornelius, the principal percussionist for Santa Fe Symphony and the New Mexico Philharmonic, is one of two guest performers in Voices of Life, Voices of Light. The other is violinist Elizabeth Young, who happens to be Tiranno’s wife.

Tiranno assumes that this weekend’s performances mark the Southwestern U.S. debut of *Everyday Wonders: The Girl from Aleppo*.

“There was a performance of it in London in 2018,” he says. “I’ve never seen it, but I was moved by the story. As I started looking through the music, I thought, ‘This is incredible.’”

details

Voices of Life, Voices of Light

3 p.m. Saturday, January 10, and Sunday, January 11

Christ Church Santa Fe

1213 Don Gaspar Avenue

\$10-\$35

theziasingers.org

How to Join

Zia Singers rehearses from 3:45 to 5:45 p.m. Tuesdays at Cristo Rey Church. Women interested in joining can find info at theziasingers.com. The group performs two concerts a year, one in winter and one in spring.

More from Mustafa

To hear Nujeen Mustafa discuss her inspiring journey, visit sfnm.co/NujeenTalks.

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Pasatiempo reporter