

# THE UNIVERSITY SINGERS NEWSLETTER

UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA  
MCINTIRE DEPARTMENT of music



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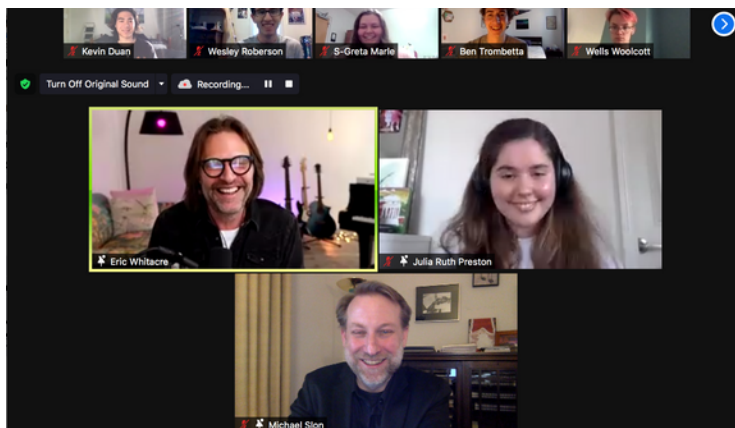
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Eric Whitacre virtual master class with the U-Singers, spring 2021

## University Singers Virtual Guest Artists

Julia Ruth Preston (CLAS '22)

As we all know, the past academic year posed a myriad of new challenges to the performing arts. In addition to a severely limited rehearsal and performance capacity, our ability to work with other musical artists was initially in jeopardy. But taking the circumstances in stride, Professor Slon took great care to ensure the value of our online rehearsals and continue our long tradition of collaboration with guest artists and musicians. In particular, the singers were incredibly fortunate to speak via Zoom with a few choral composers about their careers, bodies of work, and evaluations of the modern choral landscape.

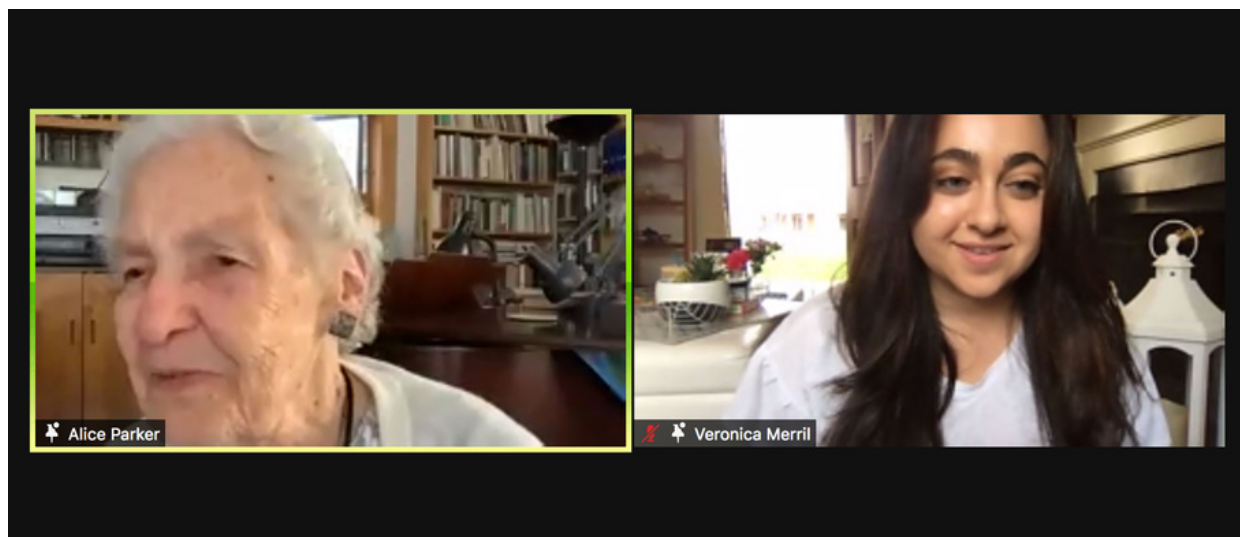
We began our series in the spring of 2020 with a virtual visit from Jake Runestad, an award-winning American composer. Runestad was kind enough to meet with the members of Chamber Singers, mainly discussing his work “A Silence Haunts Me,” which the group was working on before the University went online. The piece’s lyrics are translated directly from Ludwig van Beethoven’s Heiligenstadt Testament, a letter written by Beethoven to his brothers in 1802. Runestad’s musical setting beautifully matches the tone of the letter, which details Beethoven’s despair over his increasing deafness. In addition to fielding questions from the singers, Runestad also provided great insight into his piece “Come to the Woods,” which the U-Singers performed on our 2017 concert tour -- and his compositional process, playing everyone a few draft sketches he’d recorded on his iPhone.

Our next guest was Arreon Harley-Emerson, who led the University Singers through a lecture and discussion of African American choral traditions in February of 2021. A conductor, entrepreneur, and educator, Harley-Emerson is also a champion of choral music as a vehicle for social progress. He currently serves as the Director of Music and Operations at the Choir School of Delaware, and he encouraged the U-Singers to acknowledge and prioritize the community equity and inclusivity that can be achieved through the musical arts. That same evening, Harley-Emerson also joined nationally-celebrated composer Adolphus Hailstork for a conversation with the Oratorio Society of Virginia, also conducted by Michael Slon.

The University Singers together with alumni and faculty guests were also proud to welcome world-renowned composer Eric Whitacre to class in late February. The choir has performed many of Mr. Whitacre's pieces through the years, and is also part of a consortium of choruses who have commissioned work from him. Most recently, the ensemble performed "little man in a hurry" (on a text by e.e. cummings) and "Water Night" (text by Octavio Paz) on our Spring 2019 tour to the Northeast U.S. and Canada. The conversation was, as Mr. Whitacre put it, "food for the soul," covering wide-ranging topics from the compositional process, text setting, and worldwide virtual choirs, to the transformative and emotional arc of a single piece. While many of the singers have been inspired by his music for years, having the chance to speak with him about composition and his reverence for interdisciplinary intersections in the arts was indeed a highlight.

And lastly, we were incredibly blessed to speak with Alice Parker, a time-honored American choral legend. The choir first enjoyed a Virginia Film Festival screening of *Alice*, a biographical film shot and directed by Eduardo Montes-Bradley, in the fall semester. Our virtual meeting with Alice Parker in April of 2021 was incredibly fruitful, as she imparted a lifetime of choral wisdom to the singers. (She was 95 years old at the time of our discussion!) Parker discussed her years as a female composer, conductor, and teacher, the importance of casual music-making in everyday life, and her impact on her local community. She left us with a call to sing as much as we possibly can, emphasizing that "the page itself is a perversion of the sound... any sound that you draw off of the page, you bring to it."

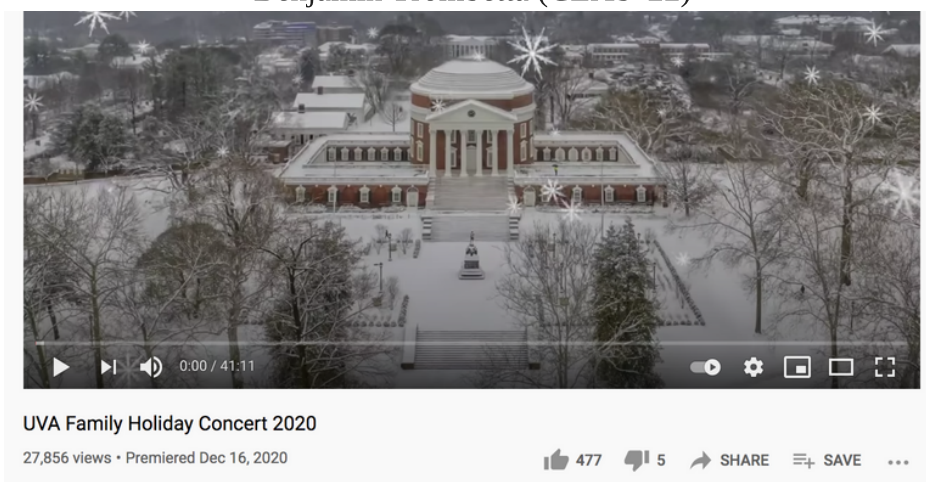
We want to thank all of our guest speakers from the past academic year. Their dedication to their craft was a much-needed reminder of music's resilience during such an unprecedented time. The U-Singers will surely keep their sage advice in mind when pursuing musical excellence this year. Hopefully, we'll be able to reconnect with these artists (and beyond) face-to-face, sooner rather than later!



Alice Parker answers a question from Veronica Merrill (Spring 2021)

## Bringing Holiday Magic to our Living Rooms: The Virtual Family Holiday Concert

Benjamin Trombetta (CLAS '22)



The COVID-19 pandemic brought unforeseen amounts of isolation, most notably to musicians and singers who could not come together in person to share their melodies. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, artists like Professor Slon were determined to spread holiday cheer through innovative music – cue the Virtual Family Holiday Concert. Released via YouTube livestream at 8pm on December 16th, 2020, the forty-five minute Family Holiday Concert quickly garnered several thousand views through alumni engagement and publicity efforts from UVA leaders like Jody Kielbasa, Vice Provost of the Arts. As of December 2021, the holiday concert now boasts upwards of 28,000 views on the UVA University Singers channel, which only continues to grow! Working closely with Janet Kaltenbach of the Charlottesville Symphony, Slon’s original vision for the concert was to combine virtual choirs with video recordings from earlier holiday concerts, audio recordings, solos from orchestra principals, and home-taped introductions. After speaking with Kielbasa, Slon was eager to expand on his artistic vision; with support from UVA Arts and U-Singers leading the way, he collaborated with Rob Dunnenberger to create a professional video product. Dunnenberger, who has also worked for the Virginia Film Festival, was “a tremendous pleasure to collaborate with,” in Professor Slon’s words. With support from Kielbasa’s office, Slon was able to hire Studio 1Q to create an animated opening, which follows a snowflake’s journey to the music of Old Cabell Hall, before transitioning into the University Singers’ performance of “Carol of the Bells,” a virtual choir completed by the Arts Laureate company.

As past presidents and general managers will know, a virtual family holiday concert poses one crucial question: how can we incorporate audience participation into “Five Golden Rings?” Luckily, Molly Childers (Tour Manager, ’21) had a solution – ask members of the UVA community to send in recordings of themselves singing. Professor Slon and the 2020-21 Exec team invited University Singers alumni and their children, Charlottesville Symphony principals and their families, and even President Jim Ryan to belt out “Five Golden Rings!” In the end, many familiar faces from the UVA Music community were featured, both singers and instrumentalists. Childers’ idea came in handy in 2021 as well, when the videos were again featured during our first holiday concert back in Old Cabell Hall.

Elizabeth Muse, Senior Director for Global Engagement and UVA Clubs, asked if her office could sponsor a preview event for the concert over Zoom, featuring behind-the-scenes interviews with Slon, Kielbasa, and Benjamin Rous, Director of the Charlottesville Symphony. Almost 1,000 people attended the Zoom webinar, which launched the next phase of the concert’s success. Each year, President Ryan sends an official holiday greeting to the UVA community. Ryan’s assistant, Matt Weber, helped to feature the Family Holiday Concert as the annual holiday video; once emailed out on December 19th, 2020, the video skyrocketed to 25,000 views, spreading holiday cheer around the world. Viewers celebrated the concert’s success with comments like this one: “the concert in Old Cabell has for the last 16 years marked the beginning of the holiday season for my family. We looked forward to the show every year. We watched our family grow and have memories marked by each concert. Thanks for evoking all those great memories again. It’s not the same as being together with 800 people, but it will suffice!” Despite the arduous and challenging year, the Virtual Family Holiday Concert offered a glimmer of hope as the University Singers community found ways to persevere and spread holiday joy beyond the Old Cabell stage.



Special thanks to Jody Kielbasa, Rob Dunnenberger, Elizabeth Muse, Stewart Searle, Sanjay Suchak, Veronica Merrill (Historian '21), James Ryan, Ian Baucom, Alison Levine, Gene Schutt, VirtualChoir.net, Arts Laureate, Studio 1Q, the UVA Department of Music and Administrative Staff, UVA College of Arts and Sciences, Charlottesville Symphony Society, Office of the Provost and Vice Provost for the Arts, UVA Office of Engagement, The UVA Parents Fund, and the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation for all their help in making the virtual Family Holiday Concert a success. Until next year!

## Reflection From the Class of 2024

Laura Read (ARCH '24)

It was September 2020. When 3:30 PM came around, I would lift my laptop from my desk to my lofted bed so the camera would still be trained on me while I stood and vocalized to warm up. My roommate would probably have turned on the noise cancellation feature of her headphones so that my singing didn't disturb her class. It would have been our sixth or seventh consecutive hour of the day in our cinder block cube, aside from leaving once to grab lunch between Zoom calls. We would hover back and forth between our beds and desks, eyes strained from perpetual blue light, backs sore from hunching over the keyboard. I had lived the same day over and over again, shut in my dorm all day, my mind imprinted with faces of people I'd never seen in person.

My hamster-wheel life was only interrupted by brief exploits to the library and the prospect of outdoor, in-person rehearsals with the University Singers. Though masked and ten feet apart, I still remember when the first chord we created shimmered through the monotony of the past several weeks. It was the first time I had sang with a group since February 2020. It felt strange and surreal at the same time to be surrounded by faces and meeting digital faces in the flesh. In a year when everything seemed cyclical and dull, a walk to the dappled light of a garden layered in sound was like an exhale of relief. The most meaningful connections I made were the ones that formed in a choir from the strange virtual year. Despite the cacophony of helicopters, construction noise, and little semblance of dynamics, despite no concerts or maskless singing in sight, the University Singers were still my light in the darkness.

Today, our lives at UVA are filled with so much more diversity of movement and sound, light and color. My eyes no longer burn from overusing my laptop, though I forgot I actually have to wear my glasses to see the board in lecture halls. My day is full of simple nothings that never existed during COVID. I listen to music and audiobooks on my meandering walks. I converse and laugh with the former strangers who sit beside me in auditoriums. I pass friends on sidewalks. I've heard some call this transition back to normal "exhausting" after growing accustomed to the daily stationary void of Zoom. While it was tough to get the gears going, I find peace in the renewal of daily ritual and what feels like seeing the world in color afresh. (ask laura abt the change)

But perhaps most rewarding, in the in between of it all, we get to sing. We hold hands through music, surrounded by a space and roof over our heads, and our sound has returned. While we wait in limbo for the pandemic to retreat, we sing into the interval.



Laura Read, Co-Publicity Chair

## The 20th Anniversary of 9/11

Abby Uveges (CLAS '23)



U-Singers National Anthem & U-Singers/Air Force flyover!

“Y’all weren’t there,” Karen Dalton, one of our pianists, remarked. “Y’all weren’t there when the towers came down.”

She was speaking to the group at a Wednesday rehearsal, just before our performance of the National Anthem at the weekend’s football game. The game was set to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. No one in the group except Professor Slon and the accompanists remembered the September 11 attacks, myself included. And yet one could bet that at least half the group was affected by the attacks, either directly or indirectly, as many are from the D.C. area.

I was brought near to tears, hearing Karen recall getting a phone call that the Twin Towers had been attacked. There was a shift in the group. Suddenly we were attentive to the fact that singing the National Anthem for the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks would be profoundly different than singing it for any basketball game. As our director, Professor Slon is always telling us to be active singers. He often walks us through the lyrics of songs we perform, emphasizing meaning and context. He goes to great lengths to give us a well-rounded musical education – from corresponding with the composers or arrangers about their intentions behind a piece, to having us meet said composers or arrangers.

These things cannot necessarily be done with the singing of the National Anthem, as Francis Scott Key has long since passed.

“‘O’er the ramparts we watch’d were so gallantly streaming...’ What were we watching?” Professor Slon had asked. It’s not a question one would often consider.

Can you imagine a battle scene where one of the only things left standing was your country’s flag? It’s a powerful image.

At what seemed like the crack of dawn, we were out of our beds and on our way to Scott Stadium. We had our sound check at around 8:30am for a game that didn’t begin until 11am; on a chilly morning, the enthusiasm was not yet there. Nearing game time, just before we were set to begin, the crowd was shown a video informing us that a recently graduated alumnus of the university had died in a helicopter crash while on active duty. Suddenly, I was ready to give this performance my all. We lined up – three rows and twelve microphones pointed in our direction. We sang with impassioned truth and resilience. The bridge of the Anthem always makes me emotional, but I found myself quite choked up during this performance in particular. I had to stop for a few words because – between the gravity of the event, the harmonies soaring together, and the heartfelt look on Professor Slon’s face – I nearly shed a tear. The song ended with a superbly timed flyover, led by none other than a UVA University Singers alumna, Captain Chelsea Bailey, USAF. The group’s resonance coupled with the whoosh of the jet made the earth seem still.

Reader, I wish you could have been there (and, if you were, then I hope you too were moved). In the course of this anniversary year, I hope that you take time to reflect on what it means for you as an individual to be of the “land of the free and the home of the brave,” as Francis Scott Key wrote so beautifully all those years ago. I hope that you hold your loved ones tight and acknowledge that the next moment is never guaranteed, as 8:46am was not guaranteed for some of those living blithely just minutes before. Finally, I hope that you keep live music in your life, as its analog nature can never be mimicked by a machine. You have been here for us and we will be here for you.

## Chamber Singers

Miles Jackson (CLAS '23)

The past year was, above all, a year of adaptation and resilience for the University of Virginia Chamber Singers. Whether we were fighting to be heard while our microphones were unintentionally muted over Zoom, or fighting to be heard over the din of construction in small (socially distanced and masked) groups outdoors, the Chamber Singers never failed to make the best of their varied and uncertain circumstances.

Knowing there would likely be no fall or spring concert, instead of a performance-oriented semester, we shifted our focus toward singing for the sake of singing, and toward growth—as a group, but also as confident individual singers. With this new mindset, we rehearsed a wide assortment of material for small groups, ranging from works of the Renaissance such as “Sicut Cervus” by Giovanni Palestrina and “If Ye Love Me” by Thomas Tallis, to contemporary works such as “You Are The New Day” and a beautiful jazz arrangement of “Somewhere Over The Rainbow.”

In the spring, the Chamber Singers continued making progress partly over Zoom and partly outdoors. A highlight of the semester was when Chamber Singer and bass Brian Christner skillfully developed a rehearsal widget, taking each singer’s recording of their own part to create a single cohesive recording for the group to collectively enjoy and assess. We primarily focused on Palestrina’s *Missa Brevis* in the spring, while periodically exploring shorter works like “Sunday” from Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Sunday in the Park with George* and “Þýtur í straúm,” an Icelandic lullaby and particular favorite among the Singers.

Taking “Sunday” from the spring as a point of inspiration, in the fall, the Chamber Singers performed a unique selection of choral arrangements from the music of Broadway. We were very excited to invite UVA Drama Professor Emeritus Bob Chapel to help choreograph and stage certain pieces throughout the concert as well, including “Our Time” from *Merrily We Roll Along* and “Sunday.” The concert featured solos from members of the group both old and new, performing everything from modern hits (including *Hamilton*) to the Golden Age of Broadway.

This spring, the Chamber Singers will be tackling a very special project along with five other universities. The *Defiant Requiem*, created and conducted by Murry Sidlin, honors the prisoners of the Terezín Concentration Camp during the Holocaust, who, against all odds, banded together to learn the Verdi Requiem with a single copy of the score, in a salient act of solidarity and defiance. Combining a performance of the Requiem, video accounts from survivors of the original Terezín choir, and more, the 20th Anniversary concert promises to be a powerful experience, to say the least. Join us on Wednesday, April 20th at 7:30 pm for the performance at Strathmore Music Center in Maryland!



UVA Chamber Singers at Family Weekend (Fall 2021)



## A Letter from the Director

Dear University Singers Alumni and Friends,

Greetings from Charlottesville! As we hopefully emerge from this pandemic (with so many of us having now experienced Covid directly) and into the new life of spring, we hope you and yours are well.

One offshoot of this strange period is a reawakening to the miracle that is in-person music-making. The first four-part chord we heard back together in Old Cabell Hall last fall was a tear-inducing revelation. It's been a pleasure since to be reunited rehearsing (even in masks), performing concerts, connecting with audiences, and seeing the flourishing camaraderie

among the Singers on and off the stage. We've been able to welcome you back for concerts in the hall and online, return to a chorus of nearly a hundred singers, and plan new projects. Thanks and admiration go to several years of Exec officers, who have nobly carried the torch, and to the student singers whose dedication to the choral art has been stronger than the challenges of the times. (Special thanks also to those who reached out in a variety of supportive ways when my father passed away last spring.) While more re-building remains, the spirit and musical life of the University Singers is alive and well.

Here in the newsletter, you can read about some of last year's achievements – including the widely watched 2020 Family Holiday Concert video, and our Zoom sessions with choral luminaries including Alice Parker and Eric Whitacre – and hear about more recent activities. Along with the return to concerts, one event from the fall stands out – our performance of the National Anthem on the anniversary of 9/11, with a flyover – and extraordinarily, the lead Air Force F-22 was piloted by U-Singers alumna Capt. Chelsea Bailey! Incredible.

We're now at work on the extraordinary Rachmaninoff *Vespers (All-Night Vigil)*, and several other projects – including a Chamber Singers collaboration with other universities at the Strathmore Music Center – and look forward to welcoming you back for the first-ever full performance of the Vespers here in Charlottesville, or at our encore performance in Washington D.C. In addition, I understand some plans are underway to celebrate my 20th anniversary here at UVA – more reflections on that later, but will look forward to seeing many former student singers to connect and celebrate together!

In the meantime, we look forward to welcoming you back for concerts, we welcome your direct support of our endeavors and ideas for growth, and we thank you for your continued support of the UVA choral program and the University Singers.

Stay well, best wishes,

Michael Slon  
Professor & Director of Choral Music



## A Letter from the President

Dear friends and alumni,

I am excited and honored to write to you all as the University Singers President in our 64th season. After a year and a half of making music to the best of our ability over zoom and outdoors in Garden VII, as sounds of distant leaf blowers and chapel bells stalled rehearsals, we are incredibly grateful to return to Old Cabell Hall. Though we are navigating this transition amidst still uncertain circumstances, we have already had such a wonderful, busy start to the year and look forward to sharing many more performances with the community!



In August, we were delighted to sing at Convocation again, our very first in-person performance since before the pandemic. We had the unique opportunity to share our music and school spirit as we welcomed both the classes of 2024 and 2025 to Grounds! We also were lucky to be joined by our newest members from Fall 2021 at our Rotunda Sing performance. It was truly remarkable how quickly they learned Virginia Hail to sing alongside us. Thanks to their presence, the choir felt whole once again. Most memorably, we were honored to sing the National Anthem at the UVA football game on September 11th, the twenty year anniversary of 9/11. In addition, we are proud to say that the lead F-22 pilot for the flyover was a U-Singers alumna, Captain Chelsea Bailey! In typical U-Singers fashion, Chelsea's plane arrived at the stadium right as our final chord rang out.

This fall, we returned to our ambitious schedule as we performed three concerts. We were thrilled to finally celebrate women of UVA and 50 years of co-education for our concert in November, featuring works from several female composers, including one of UVA's own former professors, Judith Shatin. And of course, we were delighted to perform our traditional Family Holiday Concerts in December alongside the Charlottesville Symphony, bringing musical joy in the holiday season. We also look forward to our performance of Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil in collaboration with the Oratorio Society of Virginia this upcoming semester!

Every rehearsal, we set aside a couple of minutes for officer announcements, and I have the opportunity to say a few words to the singers. I vividly remember my first year in the group and looking up to the president at the time, in awe of his poignant words. Each rehearsal, I get a little nervous thinking about what to say because I want it to be perfect. But, if the past year and a half has taught us anything, it is that we truly cannot prepare for what will come next, let alone do so perfectly. We never know what's around the corner that could change our lives in a matter of seconds. So, I love to remind the singers every day to never take rehearsal for granted. We have the privilege of making music together again, all 90 of us under one roof, but there is no telling how long that will last given changing circumstances. I emphasize to everyone to make each rehearsal truly count as if it was our last and passionately bring the music to life. That being said, I hope you all experience every musical moment to the fullest extent, whether you are singing in your car, with some friends, or with an entire choir. Take it all in and reflect on the current opportunity to make music together we have once again been given. Wherever you may be and whomever you may be singing with, I hope you find more musical joy every day.

Sincerely,  
Harini Peri, University Singers President  
UVA Class of 2022





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If you are interested in including the University Singers in your estate plans, thereby providing future ongoing support to the organization, please contact Cindy LaVarra at the College Foundation at [cindylavarra@virginia.edu](mailto:cindylavarra@virginia.edu).



# 2020-2021 Photo Album!







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The University Of Virginia  
McIntire Department of Music

# **UNIVERSITY SINGERS**

P.O. Box 400176  
Charlottesville, VA 22904-4716  
[www.music.virginia.edu/usingers](http://www.music.virginia.edu/usingers)  
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## **Hear us sing!** 2021-2022 Season

### **University Singers Fall Concert 2021 – Celebrating 50 years of full co-education**

Visit: <https://www.youtube.com/c/UVAUniversitySingers>

### **Chamber Singers Fall Concert 2021 – Choral music from Broadway**

Click on Featured channels: Chamber Singers on the U-Singers YouTube channel

### **Chamber Singers in Defiant Requiem at Strathmore Music Center – April 20th**

<https://www.defiantrequiem.org/events/the-music-center-at-strathmore/>

### **Rachmaninoff Vespers – University Singers & Oratorio Society of Virginia**

Friday, April 29th – 8:00 pm, St. Thomas Aquinas Church, Charlottesville  
(with Sloniversary – 20 years at UVA – to follow)

Sunday, May 1st – 4:00 pm, National City Christian Church, Washington D.C.

More info at: <https://music.virginia.edu/Rachmaninoff-All-Night-Vigil>