

200 voices would make Handel proud

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More than 200 strangers came together in Lawrenceville on Sunday to unite their voices in song.

This was no "Down By the Old Mill Stream" audience participation number with a ball bouncing on the lyrics.



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Artistic director G.
Phillip Shoultz III
conducts the Gwinnett
Choral Guild.

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Instead, the crowd joined four soloists and a string quartet to sing excerpts from "The Messiah" by George Frideric Handel, a piece noted for its vocal complexity since its debut in 1742.

The singing became better and better as the day went on, ending with a raise-the-roof version of the Hallelujah chorus.

The event at Lawrenceville Presbyterian Church was put on by the BJ Chorale and the Gwinnett Choral Guild.

It's the fourth year for the singalong.

"It can be done so many different ways, and so many people can be blessed by the music," said Joyce Parks, who founded the BJ Chorale and is the organist at Lawrenceville Presbyterian. "It was a wonderful crowd."

Parks said she hopes the event continues to grow, getting to the point where "we'd have to use the Civic Center" on Sugarloaf Parkway in Duluth.

"It's one of the harder things to perform," said G. Phillip Shoultz III, who directed the singalong. "Everybody did well."

Shoultz is director of adult music at Snellville First United Methodist Church and artistic director of the Gwinnett Choral Guild.

He also was one of the featured soloists, singing tenor.

"I think [Handel would] be pleased that his music has reached an iconic status," Shoultz said, and added jokingly, "along with the royalties."

Kathy Manzella and her friend Janie Berry made the trip from Greensboro after seeing news of the singalong on the Internet.

"I haven't sung since I was in college," Manzella said, "but I've sung ['The Messiah'] before." Manzella sings tenor.

Handel "wanted to open up music to the common people," Berry said. "The message is so powerful everyone is inspired to join in."

Shoultz said as much in his opening remarks to the crowd.

"This is going to be a lot of fun," he said. "This is not a performance; it's a community sharing opportunity."

"It was worth the 90-mile trip," Berry said afterward.

Along with Shoultz, soloists included soprano Lynne Evans, alto Sherry Rice and bass Bob Ferrell.

Accompaniment was ably provided by the Candler Quartet Strings and Parks on organ. Eddy Oliver, organist at Mount Vernon Baptist in Atlanta, knew he had to get to the Lawrenceville singalong.

"I've been to these before," he said. "I thought I'd come and enjoy the fun."

"I think [Handel] would have loved to see something like this," he said of the broad appeal of the music to a diverse crowd. "I think he would have said, 'Praise God!' "