



It's fitting that Kathryn Nicholson (below) is a choral director with the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival, given how taken she was by the city's springtime flowering during her first few days here. Devonyu photo.

Voices in full bloom

The Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival features pop-up concerts that welcome spring with singers of all stripes

BY ALEXANDER VARTY



Like a lot of springtime arrivals to Vancouver, Kathryn Nicholson was not only impressed by our city's vernal beauty, but somewhat overwhelmed.

"I arrived ahead of my husband, looking for a place to live, and it was right in the spring when the azaleas, the rhodos, and the cherry trees were all in bloom," she tells the *Georgia Straight* from wintry Burlington, Ontario, where she's visiting her new grandson. "I remember walking down one of those streets in East Vancouver where they have that canopy of cherry trees. You just walk under this archway of pink, and the blossoms are all creating this fantastical pink world as you walk through it. It was just brilliant—and it was different, because we didn't have those kinds of cherry trees where I grew up."

Later on, she continues, "My uncle was driving me around, and an odd sort of comment came into my mind: it was 'Vancouver! Cover yourself!' The city was like a woman wearing too much jewellery, and I was just like, 'Whoa! This is just too much!'"

These days, though, Nicholson has grown accustomed to the Lower Mainland's seasonal shades, and rather than cover our spring blooms she's about to celebrate them, as the point person for the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival's Vancouver Sings One Song series of pop-up concerts. The director of the Sound Eclectic choir and her core group of singers will host an open rehearsal and vocal workshop at Christ Church Cathedral at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday (April 3); several hundred singers are expected to attend, with the first 400 receiving a free VSOS T-shirt. After that, they'll disperse through the city, leading public sing-alongs at the Cherry Jam Downtown Concert (at Burrard Station next Thursday [April 5]) and Sakura Days Japan Fair (at the VanDusen Botanical Garden on April 14 and 15). Singers of any ability—or even none at all—are welcome to take part in all four events.

and we'll sing all these lovely songs together."

The Vancouver Sings One Song repertoire, she adds, is a little larger than a single ditty. Participants will actually learn four: Japan's traditional cherry-blossom-viewing anthem "Sakura, Sakura"; the Navajo chant "Now I Walk in Beauty"; Ludwig van Beethoven's anthemic "Ode to Joy"; and a new number written for the occasion by local musicians Tom Landa and Robin Layne, "Cherry Blossoms for You and Me". None will tax even amateur singers, and sheet music for all four can be downloaded from the VCBF website.

It's no coincidence that the chosen songs reflect Vancouver's cultural diversity, representing as they do Asian, European, First Nations, and Latin strains.

"I believe that singing is an extraordinary way for people to connect with one another," says Nicholson, who has firsthand experience with music's power to heal: she's trained as both a nurse and a music therapist, and currently works as a clinical counsellor with the Vancouver Hospice Society. "One's voice is a very intimate expression of who we are. So when one does have the opportunity to sing, and to sing in harmony and in the company of other people, it's not just beneficial to one's health, it *feels* good. You feel a sense of belonging and participation, and it's very joyful.

"If you read some of the studies on music therapy," she adds, "they'll say that when you sing with other people or make music with other people, sometimes your heartbeats begin to be in rhythm with one another." And at a time when so many forces are working to divide us into warring camps, even within our own blossom-bedecked city, who wouldn't want some of that? ♦

The Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival takes place at various Vancouver locations from Tuesday (April 3) to April 29. For a full schedule, visit www.vcbf.ca/.

"Everybody can sing," Nicholson stresses. "Not everybody can play a guitar or play the piano if they haven't had the chance to learn that, but everybody can sing—even though, often, they're told that they can't keep a tune. So the invitation is 'Wear your T-shirt and come on up to the front, or stand up where you are,



Vernal traditions from Japan are in the air

With cherry-blossom viewing being a national pastime in Japan, it's not at all sur-

prising that many Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival events have a Japanese connection that goes beyond the ritual singing of "Sakura, Sakura". (A title that, by the way, translates as "Cherry Blossoms, Cherry Blossoms".) Take, for example, the Cherry Jam Downtown Concert at Burrard Station next Thursday (April 5). Yes, the event will feature the Vancouver Chinese Music Ensemble (with erhu virtuoso Ji Rong Huang), pianist Ken Cormier, and the appropriately ecumenical Sound Eclectic choir, but its dramatic highlight will almost certainly be the collaboration between shakuhachi master Alvin Ramos and Richmond's Tetsu Taiko drum troupe.

Japanese heritage is built into the VCBF's Sakura Night Gala, at the Stanley Park Pavilion on April 22. Your \$160 ticket will allow you to sample the creations of eight top chefs and mixologists, several of them of Japanese or Japanese-Canadian descent. Among the delights on offer will be gourmet ramen and sushi; *harusame* noodle salad; savoury mochi with duck and shiitake mushrooms; a venison, wasabi-leaf, and smoked-cherry tartare; a wild knotweed dish; and, for dessert, sake macarons.

And then there's the Sakura Days Japan Fair, at VanDusen Botanical Garden on April 14 and 15, which looks rather like the Powell Street Festival, were that annual celebration of Japanese culture magically transported to a more scenic, if less historically significant, location. Under the garden's plentiful cherry trees you'll be able to sample Japanese festival foods; hear Kohei Honda and Keita Kanezashi perform on Tsugaru shamisen and percussion; experience several different forms of Japanese dance; and get up close—but not *too* close—to hand-crafted samurai armour and weaponry.

Of course, we won't judge those who opt to grab a Hershey's Cherry Blossom chocolate and scarf it down under a neighbourhood tree, but with so many other floral options to choose from, why not explore?

> STAFF

THINGS TO DO

ARTS



Editor's choice

It's a rare musician who has the honour of being presented by both Early Music Vancouver, purveyors of all things baroque and beyond, and Music on Main, whose focus is on 21st-century innovation. It's also a rare musician who can perform Persian classical music, Italian art song, and contemporary improvisation with equal aplomb. Combine all of those qualities into a single Venn diagram, and you'll find Montreal-based Ziya Tabassian at its centre. Just last month, Tabassian and Ensemble Constantinople joined soprano Susie LeBlanc in an EMV program of Venetian music that was rapturously received, and now the setar master is coming back with Estonian singer and violinist Maarja Nuut to play MoM's A Month of Tuesdays series at the Fox Cabaret on April 3. Expect magic. ♦

High five

Five events you just can't miss this week

- 1 THE HUMANS** (To April 22 at the Stanley Industrial Alliance Theatre) A portrait of an American family that puts the "funk" back into *dysfunction*.
- 2 CHELSEA HOTEL** (To April 21 at the Firehall Arts Centre) A truly inspired musical ode to the late Leonard Cohen.
- 3 BOBBIE BURGERS** (To April 7 at the Equinox Gallery) The local painter shows big, lush black-and-white flowers.
- 4 BUTCHER** (To March 31 at the Cultch) The twistiest, blackest thriller you may see on-stage all year.
- 5 CULTURE AT THE CENTRE** (To October 8 at the UBC Museum of Anthropology) A striking survey of work coming out of five Indigenous centres in B.C.

In the news

On March 23, Canadian Heritage Minister Mélanie Joly announced that the federal government will provide \$7 million to the Children's Arts Umbrella Association for its new home on Granville Island.

It's the largest single amount of funding for B.C. in the history of the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund, a federal cultural infrastructure program. The association operates Arts Umbrella, which offers arts education in dance, theatre, music, visual arts, and digital arts to more than 20,000 young people. Each year, more than 9,000 children are able to access its program free of charge or at a reduced rate through outreach programs and bursaries.

Lisa Beare, B.C.'s minister responsible for culture, announced on the same day that the province will contribute \$1.4 million.

The money will go toward upgrading Arts Umbrella's new 50,000-square-foot facility at 1400 Johnston Street (formerly Emily Carr University of Art + Design's South Building). The renovated space will be home to seven dance studios; four theatre and music studios; eight visual, applied, and media arts studios; a 160-seat professional theatre; an exhibition gallery; and new workshop spaces.

Architect Richard Henriquez will lead the renewal of the building. ♦

