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Cambridge offers small-stage intimacy for Ben Heppner

VALERIE HILL
RECORD STAFF

CAMBRIDGE

World-renowned tenor Ben Heppner cheerily chats on the phone from his hotel in Berlin, Germany, one of several European destinations in his latest tour, which will finish up here next Friday.

While not exactly the most international of venues, Cambridge will offer the acclaimed Toronto singer something he sometimes misses on the more expansive stages: intimacy. And for the audience, it's a chance to get up close and personal at the concert performance called Opera & Oratorio with Ben Heppner & Friends, with the Cambridge Community Orchestra.

"When you're doing an opera, you don't take the audience into consideration," he said. "There's that fourth wall. You can't tell if they're with you or not. With concerts, you're in direct contact with them. You can relate to them in a really unique way. I love that."

The fundraising benefit for the Hespeler-based Heritage College & Seminary, will feature a college choir and Heppner singing a selection of pieces from Sir Paolo Tosti, in both Italian and English. Heppner said he has recorded several of the great composer's songs.

Tosti (1846-1916) was an Italian born singer and composer who moved to London, England in 1885 and became the toast of the city. "He didn't do opera per se but he worked at the opera house," said Heppner.

"He was really the centre of musical life in London for years."

Tosti was named singing master to the Royal Family and was knighted in 1908, writing for some of the greatest singers of the time, including Enrico Caruso and Nellie Melba. His music is both beautiful and memorable. Keeping with the theme of memorable music, for his second set Heppner will sing a mix of parlour songs, all in English, reminiscent of the days when people had to entertain themselves. "It was from a time when people did their own music in their parlours," he said.

"People of all sorts will really relate to these. They're more accessible."

Though some of the songs are also challenging for the singer, one in particular is "short but a real ripper."

This concert will provide plenty of new experiences for the British Columbia native. He has not performed with the community orchestra, which was only founded four years ago. Nor has he worked with its professional conductor Sabatino Vacca, hired just last year. And the venue, Forward Baptist Church, is also new for him.

He agreed to this benefit concert because his son attended Heritage College and he supports the little college's feisty determination to stay afloat despite lacking government funding. "Since I had a personal connection," he said, adding: "They're good people."

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MUSIC

Opera & Oratorio with Ben Heppner & Friends

Friday, Feb. 13, 8 p.m. at Forward Baptist Church 455 Myers Rd., Cambridge Tickets at www.YourMusicZone.com or call 1-800-465-1961 \$20 advance, \$25 at door



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