

Singing like the Dickens, pro carolers bring cheer wherever they may roam

By GIANNI TRUZZI,
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In the elegant holiday setting of the Hunt Club lounge at Seattle's Sorrento Hotel, a darkly clad pack trolls for targets. In top hat and bonnet, bustle, mourning coat and cravat, the quartet stops at a table to dispense their gift, a precisely harmonized and modulated rendition of "Silent Night." Conversation continues elsewhere; the singers croon for the two ladies alone. The serenaded women lean over their china teapot, their rapt attention drifting with the swell of the bass voice.

As assignments go for the Dickens Carolers, a 25-year-old business in which Victorian-costumed singers are dispatched to create holiday cheer, this regular engagement to entertain the hotel patrons is tame. They will sing where asked, and although that usually means entertaining guests at malls, corporate events, office or home parties, there are unusual variations.

One quartet will be driven on a tour of the city's dental offices, a holiday gift from an oral surgeon to his colleagues for their patient referrals. Another will sing to visitors in the elevators of downtown office towers. Dickens Carolers also look forward to singing at the holiday gathering of mystic J.Z. Knight, known for channeling the ancient spirit Ramtha ("One of our best audiences," the firm's owner gushed.)

Even a seemingly straightforward booking can have its twists, as one group discovered on arrival at a private party. They were asked to sing outside, after the affair had begun, and found themselves serenading no one except themselves -- which they did with professional verve. "I guess the neighbors enjoyed it," said soprano Julia Swindle. Christmas and its attendant cheer doesn't just happen on its own; it's created by determination, tradition and work. The Dickens Carolers are one of the many kinds of paid bearers of holiday spirit we have come to rely on to help get us in the mood.



Scott Eklund / P-I

Bobby Lowe, above left, of Bellevue enjoys the entertainment of the Dickens Carolers at the Sorrento Hotel in Seattle. This group of singers consists of, from left, Tom Cooper, Ali Matak, Ann Snow and Cam Matak (brother of Ali).

The company's co-owner, Nathan Rodda, also has spent nine years as a caroler, an activity he refuses to give up. He enjoys performing and loves the response he gets from people. He not only gets to create a pleasant fantasy for his clients, he gets to inhabit it as well. "It's like living in a musical," he said.

Unofficially, carolers like Rodda and his employees are also witnesses to the season, observers of the varied ways we celebrate, and of how vital this holiday can be.

"Some people are really into their Christmas parties," he marveled, recalling private occasions where his quartet was only one of many simultaneous entertainments, including a Santa Claus and a pianist. An especially extravagant corporate party he once attended as a caroler, held in the upper floors of an Eastside office tower, even included pony rides led around the workplace cubicles.

Most events, however, are far simpler and sometimes poignant. A gift-giver may book a quartet just to sing to his or her family. On those occasions, Rodda said, "we measure our success by how many people we make cry."

Retirement homes and hospitals are another frequent venue for carolers, and they can present their own challenges. Swindle recalled performing at a hospice facility for patients with end-stage respiratory disorders. "They were all on ventilators, and they couldn't speak," she said. "You knew this would be their last Christmas." It felt solemn, not joyous, she remembered, but their audience responded with tears or a gesture as simple as taking the hand of a visiting loved one.

For the company, the holiday season begins in August, with auditions to build its quartets. This season, Dickens Carolers consists of 11 groups, but the total number will vary depending on what talent is available (tenors are the scarce commodity).



Meryl Schenker / P-I

Eric Grimes of Federal Way, Kimberly McNeil of Bothell, center, and Elizabeth Hott of Seattle delight customers at a Washington Federal Savings branch.

Although the working season is short, rehearsals begin right after Labor Day, and continue every Sunday night until Thanksgiving, in order to memorize more than 140 pages of music, and be prepared to sing "The Dreidel Song" as readily as "Away in a Manger" or "Jingle Bell Rock." In truly embracing spirit, they even learn "O Canada."

It takes more than the ability to read notes and sing to become a Dickens Caroler. Rodda, co-owner Jason Meredith and the company's two music directors also look for love of the music, for pride in creating ensemble harmonies. Personality counts too, and not just as a cheerful performer -- carolers have to spend a lot of time together in cars.

The backgrounds of the carolers spans a wide range. Of the quartet that performs at the Sorrento, baritone Mike Leach is a flooring contractor, soprano Krystal Kaald is a massage therapist, and alto Elizabeth Hott is a law firm secretary. Only tenor William Bone works in entertainment, but he drives in from Tacoma. Rodda said his roster also includes a retired dentist and a Boeing engineer with a Ph.D. in physics.

Although the singers get paid by the hour, that's rarely their motivation. In fact, when Swindle first auditioned three years ago, she thought it was a volunteer position. Rodda confirmed that is not uncommon; the first time pay is mentioned, some applicants are surprised. "I don't know anyone who's really doing it for the money," he said.

That enthusiasm for music of the season is what caused what had been a sideline business for a singing telegram company to spin into its own entity, as the singers themselves built it into something larger than the original owner envisioned. For most of its life since 1978, the business' succession of owners has been from the ranks of its carolers. The average tenure for singers is over three years, which Rodda attributes to satisfying experiences.

During one of her quartet's many performances in retirement homes, Swindle noticed a wheelchair-bound woman, slumped to the side, seemingly unaware of her surroundings or the oxygen tanks she carried alongside. When the quartet sang "O Holy Night," however, her head lifted to attention, drooping back to her shoulder only after the song concluded. "It seemed like we had touched some kind of nerve that reminded her of Christmas," Swindle said.

In a way, that's what these evangelists of good cheer do for all their audiences. They ignite sparks of memory through these all-too-familiar songs. Yet it becomes clear that the listeners are not the ones most convinced. By the end of a performance, the people most moved, it turns out, are the ones doing the singing.

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For more information about The Dickens Carolers, you can visit www.dickenscarolers.com.